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VIOLET VANE'S VOW



OR,

THE CRAFTY DETECTIVE'S CRAFT.

A Romance of the Damascus Mine
Clean Up.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "DAISY DARE," "VIOLET VANE'S
VICTORY," "THE POSY PARDS," ETC.

PROLOGUE.

THE SERPENT SIX—VIOLET VANE'S VOW.
A BLACK night, faintly lighted at irregular intervals by flashes of lightning. The wind moaned with weird solemnity through the mountain pines and in the void darkness of the mighty chasms and ravines. Far away the sullen thunder rolled and rumbled like the angry mutterings of a restless god.

"STOB DOT BEAST! STOB HIM, FOR COTT'S SAKES!" SHOUTED THE MAN ON THE RUNAWAY.

At a considerable distance up the side of a mighty mountain a great crag projected itself into the sea of darkness. But upon the outer verge of the crag twinkled a light that from the base of the mountain looked like a fallen star which had lodged there.

It was a signal-fire, fed by a huge, broad-shouldered man, who crouched beside it like some giant demon of the darkness.

"It's goin' ter be a turrible night," he growled, as he thrust more wood into the fire. "I don't more'n haf believe ther boys 'll meet 'cordin' ter app'intment. It's time they wuz hyer now. Ther captain'll come shore, but I doubt if ther rest do."

But at this moment a voice from the darkness hailed the man by the fire, and he was soon joined by another rough-looking and bewhiskered fellow. Both were heavily armed, and had the appearance of mountain desperadoes.

"Dern such a place fer a meetin'!" growled the late comer. "Hed ter leave my boss' way down thar an' hoof it. Likter never got hyer. Dunno why ther captain couldn't pickt a diffrunt place."

A few minutes later another man appeared, and shortly after that the three were joined by two more. The firelight revealed five desperate-appearing men.

The thunderstorm was rapidly approaching. The flashes of lightning had become much more vivid, and at times heaven's artillery caused the very mountains to tremble.

"If ther captain don't come pretty soon ther storm will git hyer fu'st," observed one of the five.

Barely were the words uttered when the clear, ringing notes of a bugle came echoing down the mountain-side from the clouds which shrouded the peak, so it seemed.

The five men started and looked at each other in amazement, exclaiming as one:

"Ther captain!"

Then a prolonged flash of lightning seemed to tear the blackness of night asunder, and to the five men on the mountain crag, who stood with upturned faces and staring eyes, an astounding sight was revealed.

Plunging down the mountain-side toward the crag on which twinkled the tiny fire was a horse, black as if cut from the storm-cloud above, and on the animal's back was a rider!

In the broad light of day such a ride would have seemed surely fatal, but in the darkness of a storm-threatened night it was truly madness unloosed.

The lightning's flash died in an instant, permitting the ebon veil of night to hide the blood-chilling scene from the staring eyes of the five men on the crag.

"Gods!" gasped one, catching his breath convulsively. "Man or woman, whichever ther captain is, that ride is straight ter death!"

"Caramba!" broke from the pale lips of another, a Mexican. "If he makes that ride unharmed he is in league with *el diablo*!"

Listening, they heard the ring of iron-shod hoofs. The sounds swiftly approached, and each man held his breath in apprehension.

Soon another flash showed the sable steed and its daring rider close at hand, and the men had barely time to shrink back to the very verge of the crag when horse and master appeared before them, the animal being thrown on its haunches at the very moment it seemed about to plunge from the cliff into the abyss below.

Then the reckless young rider lifted the bugle and blew a clear call which the mountain crags and gorges sent echoing wildly through the night.

"I am with you, comrades!"

Was it man or woman? The somber attire was that of a man, the face and voice those of a woman! But, what woman would dare such a mad ride?

The men muttered in awe-stricken tones to themselves. At length, one bolder than the rest said aloud:

"We see you are, captain; but you are the only person besides Satan himself who could have reached this spot in such a manner."

The one addressed laughed as if not entirely displeased, and sprung from the horse, standing a graceful, picturesque figure in the firelight.

"You are all here, I see. Good! I picked you from the best men of the old band and I feel I can trust you. You know me; I have been your leader before. Are you willing to league yourselves to me again, for better or worse?"

"We are. That's what we came here for."

"Good again! I know you fully understand what you are saying. You are men who shrink at nothing. That is the kind I want. Stand

here in a circle, place your left hand on your heart, lift your right and repeat after me."

Standing thus on the mountain crag, the five repeated the administered oath or pledge, and, as the last words were spoken, there came a stunning crash of thunder, preceded by a zig-zag of flame which seemingly went writhing across the inky heavens, like a fiery serpent.

"See!" cried the captain, with uplifted hand and upturned eyes. "That flash shall be the symbol of our league—a fiery serpent! We are the *Serpent Six*!"

Through the night rode a horseman who ever and anon tried to urge his jaded animal to a faster pace.

"On, on, old fellow!" he muttered. "The journey is nearly at an end. Soon you will have food and rest and I shall be blessed by the light from the bright eyes of the one I love. Ione is waiting for me. Once again with her—and I assume my true name and drop the title of Violet Vane forever; I will leave the old wild life behind, never to return to it. True, it has been full of excitement and adventure, but, for some reason, it seems to have left a bitter taste in my mouth. Just now almost any life seems better, nobler than that of card-sharp, adventurer, or detective. Go on, old horse, go on!"

Soon the lights of a town rose out of the darkness before him, and within twenty minutes he drew rein at the door of a ramshackle hotel.

Waiting for nothing, he leaped to the ground and dashed into the building. It was strangely thronged with people, rough denizens of the mines, all of whom seemed excited. The advent of the stranger was not noticed.

"Ther old galoot's goin' ter croak, fer shore," Violet Vane heard one rough observe to another.

"Yep," was the response. "Ther p'isen cusses giv him his last sickness."

"An' they got away with ther gal, Satan scorch 'em!"

"Shore's shootin'?"

"They say ther old man's all ther time callin' fer some 'un as he expects will come before he shuffles off."

The speaker felt a steel-like clutch on his arm and whirled swiftly to see a pair of midnight eyes glaring savagely into his own.

"What are you speaking of, sir?" demanded a stern voice. "What has happened? Is Owen Wilson harmed? Is his daughter—"

"Who in thunder are you?" growled the other, his hand dropping on the butt of a holstered revolver.

"I am Violet Vane, the friend whom Mr. Wilson is expecting," was the reply.

"Then you'd best hustle up ter ther pore devil's crib," suggested the miner, promptly, his hand falling from the weapon. "Satan's been ter pay, an' Wilson's got his last dost. Gal's bin carried off. Foller me, I'll show ye ther way."

One minute later the dark-eyed young man was standing beside a bed upon which lay a man with closed eyes, looking pale and lifeless. Stooping, Violet Vane touched the cold hand, saying softly:

"Mr. Wilson!"

It seemed as if his voice reached to the very portals of death. The eyelids of the dying man fluttered and slowly opened; a low sigh of joy came from his pale lips as he saw the face bending over him.

"Philip!" he faintly whispered; "I knew you would come. I have been clinging to life for the last hour that I might see you a moment at the end. My child—Ione, my darling!—you will save her!"

"So help me God I will if I can! But, what has happened? Tell me all, for I just arrived and know nothing."

"There were six of them," gasped the sinking man. "They were dressed—in black—and on their breasts—blood-red serpents. They sought to tear her from me—my little Ione! I was not strong because of my recent illness—but I fought them—with all my—strength. One struck me with—a knife. I knew no more till—I found myself here. They were gone—she was gone!"

With sudden strength, the dying one started up, grasping Vane's hand and crying:

"Repeat an oath—a vow by high heaven to hunt them down and save her! When you have so sworn I will die easy and rest peacefully in my grave. Swear—swear—"

His words were choked by a low gurgling groan and he fell back limply on the bed—dead!

With the dead man's hand still clasping his own, Violet Vane knelt by the bedside in the silent chamber where all were awe-hushed by

the sudden end of human life. He turned his eyes upward and lifted his free left hand to heaven. His lips moved, and although no sound came from them, every staring breathless witness knew he was repeating a silent sacred vow in the presence of the murdered man whose hand he clasped.

From that moment the *Serpent Six* were doomed!

CHAPTER I.

TWO MEN AND A MULE.

A CLATTER of hoofs and the hoarse "hee-haw" of a mule startled a man who had been sitting on a bowlder beside the rocky trail, slowly writing with the stub of a lead-pencil in a ragged note-book made of common wrapping-paper. He looked up, with the pencil poised, and saw the mule coming toward him at a headlong run, with a little fat man, who appeared almost dead with fright, clinging fast to the animal's back, and having both arms locked convulsively round its neck.

"Whoa, you plasted vool!" shouted the man on the runaway's back.

Then, as he saw the witness by the roadside, he yelled:

"Stob dot peast! Stob him, vor Cott's sakes!"

Apparently seeing the man at the wayside, the mule suddenly changed its direct run into a series of gyrations, and by cavorting around seemed determined to dislodge the howling rider; but the man on the bowlder seemed too astonished to render any assistance. Perceiving this, the little Dutchman shouted:

"Uf this plamed shackmule preaks mein neck I sues you mit der court damages vor, so hellup me craciou! Whoa, you imp uf der tyfel's stable! Whoa! You haf—Dunder und blitzens!"

The mule had stayed his gyrations with a suddenness that sent the rider sailing through the air like some huge frog, to land with a loud grunt at the very feet of the man to whom he had vainly appealed for assistance. He did not appear to be badly hurt, for he quickly rolled over and sat up, supporting himself with both hands on the ground, while he stared in a comical manner at the animal that had served him such a trick. And with lowered head and an air of meekness and self-reproach, the mule returned the look, seeming not a little astonished at the result of his final effort.

"Py Shimminy!" gasped the little Dutchman, as soon as he could catch his breath.

"You vos von plamed fraud," he added, shaking a clenched fist at the dejected-looking animal. "You look like you would cry von puckets uf tears, but zwi tollars I pets you vos ready to splidt mit laughin' your insides on. I haf von greadt desire to preak your neck! Ach, himmel!"

With this he arose and cautiously approached the peaceful-looking animal.

"You shust vait!" he muttered, as he cautiously lifted his right foot and balanced himself on his left; "I vill kicks der packings uf your hide out. See how you likes dot!" and he delivered a kick with all the force he could muster.

But the mule did not wait to be kicked. With a sudden whirl it avoided the punishment and the kick was wasted on empty air. Up went the fat little Dutchman's right foot, and, as it met no resistance, he landed flat on his back with a heavy thud that brought another grunt from his lips. For several seconds he lay quite still, gazing reflectively at the blue sky; then he drew a long breath and sighed:

"Id vos always thus since shildhood's hour. Nefer haf I seemed to gid much satisfaction outd uf this life, und ven I kickt I always wasted me in muscle. Id makes me feel very sad, und I somedimes vish I vos deadt und purried before I vos porn. Yaw, dot vos so."

"My friend," observed the man on the bowlder, his face untouched by a smile, although there was a suspicious twinkle of mirth in the depths of his keen black eyes, "I fear you are prone to look on the somber side of life."

"I vos on my pack, I know dot," was the quick response.

"Arise, arise! your fears throw off,
The world lies wide before you;
Heed not the foes who at you scoff,
For God's blue skies are o'er you."

"That is a little quotation from my forthcoming book of poems, and I must say it seems very appropriate to the occasion."

"Yaw, dot vos so," admitted the Dutchman, slowly arising to his feet and surveying the other, while he gently rubbed his back. "So you vos a poet, don't it? Und you dink dot v'ot you quotes vos abbrobriate? Vell, I vos nod

much of a poet, but I pets you two peers I peats dot. Here goes:

"Gid up, gid up, you plasted wool!
Vy vos you layin' there?
Next times you tries to kick a mule
Don'd kick so hardt der air.

I t'inks I gits von cobbyright on dot und makes my vortunes sellin' him."

The poet instantly arose from the boulder, and, tossing back his long dark hair with what was intended to be a very striking gesture, he extended his hand, exclaiming:

"Sir, I greet you! Although your touch may not be very delicate and refined, it is plain you have a very accurate idea of rhythm and rhyme. It is a very rare thing that in this wild land one meets a person who understands poetry in the least. Their minds are too narrow to comprehend the grandeur of heaven-born verse. I am glad to have met you. Permit me; my card!"

He unbuttoned the upper part of his shabby Prince Albert coat, revealing a sadly soiled shirt-bosom and a ragged vest, from a pocket of which he extracted a Bristol-card that was far from immaculate. This, with a flourish, he presented to the little Dutchman.

On one side of the card was printed:

"J. MILTON MOLE,
The People's Poet."

On the other side, in nonpareil type:

"Anniversary poems, \$3.00; obituaries, \$2.00; wedding effusions, \$2.00. for four stanzas (extra stanzas, 50 cts. each.) Other work at reasonable figures. Satisfaction guaranteed."

"Vell, py Shimmimy Scott!"

The little Dutchman seemed surprised. He gave the loose end of the red bandanna handkerchief tied around his neck a pull, then thrust his hand deep into the pocket of his short, tight-fitting pantaloons, and whistled softly as he stared first at the card and then at "the People's Poet."

"Dot gids me," he confessed. "I nefer hears before der likes of dot. So your peesness vos makin' boetry? I reckons py your look you don'd find him very payin' oggubation, eh?"

"Well—ahem!—I must confess it is not so remunerative in this section as it might be, but the trouble is all in the people. They do not seem to appreciate anything of such a refined nature. Still I did a little business back in Bloody Bar. All obituaries, though. Three of them. You see, Bowie-knife Jack made a strike at faro and burst the bank, then he tried to absorb all the liquor in town. He failed in this last attempt, but he became somewhat intoxicated and took the town. Three of the citizens attempted to argue with him, and the next day, when he had cooled down somewhat, Jack saw them decently interred, and paid me to write their obituaries. I have the original draughts here in my notebook. In their way they are gems, indeed. Here you have them:

"Poor 'Frisko Bob is planted here,
And on his grave we drop a tear;
With several drinks to give him vim,
He started out to down our Jim;
Poor Robert thought himself a chief,
But Jimmy's gun brought him to grief.

"The next is not quite so pathetic, but it seemed to please Jim and the boys quite as much as the first:

"Here lies the corse of Patsy Dowd,
Who boasted oft and boasted loud;
He was no match for Bowie Jim;
Beneath this slab we planted him.

"The last was a hard case, of whom the greater part of the town had stood in terror for months. Everybody was delighted with his obituary:

"This is the grave of Howling Dan,
A lively life he led;
He always was a wicked man,
And now we're glad he's dead!
'Twas Bowie Jim gave us relief,
And all agree that Jim's a chief.

"You see, I succeeded in collaring six dollars out of that little job, which I do not consider a bad day's work."

"Vell, all I haf to say is dot you vas lucky to gid outt of der blace mitoudt bein' planted under von uf your own obiduaries."

At this Mr. Mole looked puzzled, but finally observed:

"I see you are given to jesting, but I am still convinced you appreciate good poetry."

"Oh, yaw, dot vas so, bud id haf been so long since I haf heardt any, dot I don'd rememper ven vas der last time."

"Ahem! Very good joke—on me. Well, never mind. But you have not told me your name, sir."

"Ogscuse me. I vos so gombpletely knocked

into von cocked hat dot I vorgits mein manners. I haf no cardts eggcept von schmall packs vat I plays seven down mit, so I haf to tells you mein name is Fritz Schricker, und I am some-dimes caldt Frisky Fritz."

"Ah-a!" and Mole once more grasped the little Dutchman's hand. "I repeat that I am pleased to have met you. Pardon me, but if you have no further use for that card of mine I will accept it back. Many thanks. It happens to be the last I have, and the printing offices out this way do such vile work I have not seen fit to have any more printed. If this one holds out as well in the future as it has in the past, I shall not need any more unless I happen to live beyond the allotted period of man's existence—But may I inquire whither you are traveling?"

"I vas leanin' toward Damascus ven you virst saw me come roundt der corner on der pack of dot mules."

"I am traveling to Damascus myself. Perchance we may make the journey together."

"I vas agreeable if you don'd fire too much of dot boetry ad me. I am nod very strong und some of id might break me all ub in peesness."

"By all above I firmly swear that of this thing I'll have a care. Ah-a! excuse me! Quite involuntary, you know! Will slip out sometimes. I have to keep a constant guard over myself."

"Vell, I don'd vonder. Berhabs you ought to pe in some loonertentary asylum, I pelieve. I keeps mein vedder eye onto your shapes.—Bud der next questions is who vas goin' to ride dot mule v'ot I finds trafelin' aroundt all alone in combany mit himseluf."

"Why, of course you will ride him."

"I pets you your life I don'd. V'at you takes me vor, anyhow, don'd id? Dot mule don'd gost me nottings, so you may haf him if you vants him."

"The mule did not cost you anything? How was that?"

"I dells you I finds him trafelin' aroundt all alone mit himseluf. Dere vasn't anypody v'at seemed to own him, und so I dakes bossession. He travels like von steam cars undil I vants him to stob und den he gids ub und trafels like some shain-lightning don'd peaple to overtook him. I grabs him aroundt der neck und yells vor him to led ub, bud Shimmimy Jewsharps! der more I yells der vaster he goes till I don'd vas apole to ketch von breathe in more as sigsdeen minutes. Ven I dells him I vill break his neck to der roots of his dail he blats like he t'inks it von gread shoke, und vor der nexdt den minutes he travels so vast his feed don't touch der ground ad all. Ogscuse me. I vas villing to ride afoot der rest of der vay."

"Well then, the mule I'll try; I'll ride the knightly beast or die. Another slip. If he acts bad, I will recite some of my poetry to him."

"Dot vas rightt. If he runs away shust re-pead some of dot stuff und I pets zwi tollars he drops deadt his tracks in."

Mole carefully approached the mule which had been standing with lowered head and half-closed eyes. The animal did not stir, and with very little difficulty the poet climbed upon its bare back. At the word the mule started off at a slow walk.

"Vell dot peats me!" acknowledged Fritz. "Put I t'inks he raises some tyfels puty soon kvick ven he feels dat vay."

The mule moved slowly forward and the Dutchman walked at a safe distance from the animal's heels. The two men chatted agreeably, becoming more familiar with each passing minute. For an hour they advanced toward the little mining town of Damascus in that manner.

It made Fritz sweat to walk, and as he mopped his perspiring face with the ends of his bandanna handkerchief, he now and then glanced wistfully toward the mule, apparently wondering why the animal displayed no unruly symptoms with Mole riding it. Finally, when he had remained silent on the subject as long as he could, he ventured:

"Dot peast seems von leetle peet more sensible now, don'd id?"

"It is exceedingly gentle," smiled the poet.

"Berhabs I might ride him some more."

"Perhaps so."

"I vas pecoming tiredt of this valkin' peesness," hinted Fritz.

"And I am becoming tired of riding. I will dismount and you can take my place."

The mule promptly stopped at the command and allowed the poet to dismount. However, it glanced round curiously as Fritz clasped its neck and rolled upon its back.

"Gid up!"

The animal did not stir.

"Gid up!" repeated the dumpy Dutchman, thumping the mule's sides with his heels.

The next instant the beast gave a squeal, leaped into the air, coming down with its feet close together and its back arched, thus performing a beautiful "buck" that sent Fritz bounding three feet upward from its back like a huge rubber ball. And when the unlucky Dutchman fell the tricky mule was not beneath him.

CHAPTER II.

THE DUKE OF DAMASCUS—FRITZ DROPS IN.

"DUNDER und blitzens!"

Fritz struck on the ground in a sitting posture, while the treacherous mule frisked gayly away, occasionally whisking its heels in the air and giving vent to a derisive "hee-haw." The astonished Dutchman sat still a few moments staring at the retreating mule, then he arose to his feet and stood with both hands clasped upon the part of his person that had come in contact with the ground, while he muttered:

"Py cracious! dot coomes tretful near knock-in' der whole uf my prains outt. I vish I hadt a pritch-loading gannon. I vould shood der linin' of dot mule outt so kvick as nefer vas."

"Revenge, revenge!" the victim cries:

"Revenge, revenge!" the echo flies

From crag to crag and peak to peak—

The very mountains seem to speak."

quoth J. Milton Mole, striking a tragic position, with one hand pressed upon his heart and the other upraised.

"I dink I vill go cuts mein t'roat mit der sharb edge of von fetter-ped," sighed Fritz, looking quite crestfallen. "I am gladt there vas nod some more folksses aroundt to see me commit dot peautiful circus acts. Greed Scott! there vas somepody, or I vas von trute-twistin' son of a guns!"

A short distance away was an attractive-appearing young man, mounted on a clean-limbed sorrel horse. It was plain he had been a witness of Fritz's misfortune, for a smile still rested on his handsome face. He rode forward as the Dutchman and the poet turned toward him.

"That animal served you a scurvy trick, sir," he observed, in a pleasant voice. "I will overtake it and bring it back if you wish me to."

"If you overtage id, I hopes you vill kill id on der spot!" cried Fritz, fiercely. "I sells you dot mule vor ten cents, und you vill gid sheated py der pargains. I vish I hadt nefer foundt dose peast, dot's vat's der madder mit me."

"He found von mule while yet astray,

And rode the beast upon his way;

But soon he found it did not pay,

And now the imp of sin he'd slay.

Impromptu! Not very bad, eh, sir? I am a poet, sir. Permit me; my card."

Out came J. Milton Mole's card to do duty for the second time that day. Removing his battered high white hat from his abundant head of hair, he bowed low as he extended the pasteboard to the young horseman, who accepted it with a smile.

"I am happy to meet you, Mr. Mole," said the young man, with a show of respect, swinging down from the saddle and accepting the poet's outstretched hand. "I infer you are drawing inspiration from the rugged mountain scenery of this section. Who is your companion?"

"Der poy's uster gall me Frisky Fritz," the little Dutchman hastened to explain. "I always vas apoud as lifely as der pest uf them. Mein famly name vas Schricker. I vas plamed gladt you makes mein agwaintance, don'd id? Here you haf mein handt v'ot is about der size of a ham-sandwiches. How you vas, anyhow, und how vas your fadder and mudder und all der rest of der familys?"

Laughing at Fritz's hearty greeting, the young man shook the jolly fellow's hand warmly, replying:

"I can only answer for myself, and I am well. My name is Royal Norman and I belong in Damascus."

"Dot vas der-blace v'at us folksses vas leanin' at ven dot gonfoundet mule plays me some his tricks uf. I bays him vor dot somedimes, und don'd he vorged id. How far away off vas dot Damascus?"

"Only about two miles."

"Then I dinks I vill ride mit Shank's hoss der rest of der vay. Berhabs I catches dot mules before I gids there, then you vill see some circusses if you keeps your vedder eyes beeled."

"Yes," bowed Mole, "if the town is so near, we can walk very well. You need not inconvenience yourself by offering your horse, sir. We have only walked thirty miles or so and we are not tired in the least. But—excuse me—that card. Ahem! It happens to be the last I

have and I may need it before I can have some more printed. Many thanks."

Having received the card, Mr. Mole restored it to his pocket, and then the three set out for Damascus, young Norman walking beside his horse at first and chatting pleasantly with his companions.

They had traveled thus nearly a mile when the clatter of hoofs came to their ears and two mounted horses swept suddenly into view. Both were magnificent animals. One was ridden by an imposing-looking man of about forty-five, the other by a beautiful girl not far from twenty.

As the strangers saw young Norman, both lifted their whips and saluted, the man shouting something that was drowned by the clatter of hoofs. Norman lifted his hat with an air of the greatest respect, and man and maiden swept on along the winding trail.

With his hands on his hips, the little Dutchman stood and stared after the strangers till they disappeared.

"Methinks he is smitten," observed Mole, with a shrewd wink. "And I cannot wonder. That maiden was fair as a poet's dream."

"Id vas nod der gurl," declared Fritz, as soon as he could command his tongue. "Bud I peliefs dot I haf seen dot mans pefore somevares, I guess so. Who he vas?"

"That was Mr. Horatio Duke," replied Royal. "He is the leading mine-owner of Damascus and the founder of the town. He is often called 'the Duke of Damascus.'"

"Und dot gurl?"

"Is his adopted daughter," answered the young man, coloring a trifle.

"How long vas this Duke of Damascuses peen aroundt these barts?"

"Since he discovered the 'Royal Duke Mine' and founded the town three years ago."

"Ish dot so? Und haf he nefer peen away vor fife or sixt mont's ad von dime?"

"Never."

"Vell den, I makes von pig misdakes. He vas nod der man v'at I dinks he vas, I pelief. Mein eyes vos giddin' mighty deceptive und I vill haf to puy a bair uf duple-parreled sbectagles."

Once more the three moved onward toward Damascus.

"You will find our town in quite a stir," said Royal. "There has been some trouble in the 'Bengal Tiger Mine'; the men have quit work. Purely out of sympathy, the hands of the Royal Duke knocked off for to-day. They have no grievance in particular, and it is probable the most of them will resume work to-morrow."

Before long they reached a point where they could look down the trail upon the little mining-camp that lay in the hollow of a picturesque mountain pocket. And there they came upon the mule. The deceptive animal was standing beside the trail with its head hanging low down and its eyes closed.

"Shimminy!" gasped Fritz. "Dot animals vos asleeb! If I gids his pack on vonce dimes more he don'd gid me off so schlick, you pets mein poots! I vas haf a try shoost vor fun. V'en I gids his pack on I sthicks like von purdocks in a cow's dail. Now, shoost keep your eye beeled und see how I fools dot plasted peast."

Slowly and cautiously he approached the mule. The animal did not stir or open its eyes. Like a creeping cat, Fritz reached the mule's side, then with a bound he sprung upon the unconscious creature's back, at the same time giving utterance to an ear-splitting yell.

The effect was electrical.

With an answering bray, the mule fairly shot through the air and went skurrying down the trail toward the mining-town, raising a cloud of dust that slowly settled behind it. And Fritz clung fast to the animal's back as if his life depended in keeping his hold.

Into Damascus shot the mule and its rider. The door of the Sweet Buttercup Saloon was wide open, and through the portal bolted the animal! In front of the bar the tricky beast came to a dead halt, and once more the Dutchman shot over its head. But he landed fairly on his feet at the bar, down upon which he brought his clinched fist with a resounding thump, shouting:

"Two peers; von for meinseluf und von for dot shackmules!"

CHAPTER III.

FRITZ AND THE MULE IN TROUBLE—VIOLET VANE'S FIRST BLOW.

THE unexpected advent of the Dutchman and the mule in the Sweet Buttercup Saloon created some excitement. The place was thronged with the striking miners, and it was a wonder that no one had been injured by the inward rush of the animal.

As if to emphasize Fritz's order for beer, the mule sunk back upon its haunches like a dog in a sitting posture, and opening its mouth wide, gave forth a fiendish bray! At that the little Dutchman whirled swiftly round, exclaiming:

"Don'd you pe in such a plasted hurrys! I haf ordered der peers meinseluf, so you shust shud ub you het ub! You haf a leedle coldt in you voices vich makes him somev'at onbleasant to der ears. Berhaps dose beebles in here don'd wants to hear you talk some more, I guess so."

Toward the bar shambled a scowling black-eyed fellow who looked ugly enough to exterminate the Dutchman and the mule.

"W'at in thunder do you mean by coming in here in this way?" he demanded, glaring fiercely at Fritz.

"Eh? Vas you speakin' mit me?"

"Yes, I'm speakin' ter you."

"Who you vas, don'd id?"

"That's none of your blasted business, but I don't mind telling you I'm Rush Cole, a hard boy from Headwaters. My han's are stained with human gore!"

"Vas dot so? Berhaps you don'd meed me some oder dimes I dinks. I am Frisky Fritz, der pully poy mit von class eyes, und I haf der skeledons uf sigsdeen men v'at I kilt in mein hip-bucket. How vas dot for high? I vas glat I don'd mage your agwaintances. Shage hants mit yourself."

And the unruffled little Dutchman grasped his own left hand with his right and went vigorously through the motions of shaking hands, while he grinned agreeably in the face of Rush Cole.

"I believe you mean that for an insult," growled the tough, clinching his bony hands.

"I wouldn't pe so sensadive as dot for zwi hundret tollars. I don'd see v'at you wants to pe so sensadive for. If I vas in your poots und hat dot homply mugs on me, I would gif somepody's den cents to shood me. I wouldn't pe so sensadive as dot v'at you pe vor nottings ad all. Ogcuse me v'ile I trinks mein peer."

But as Fritz was turning toward the bar Cole's heavy hand fell on his shoulder, and he turned back to find himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver held in the ruffian's hand.

"Now, v'at vos der madder mit you?" demanded the Dutchman, betraying no symptoms of fear. "I pegs your bardons bud I nefer drinks oud uf dot kindt uf a pottles."

"Waal, you are liable to get a dose out of this kind of a bottle that you will not like."

"How vas dot?"

"I have half a mind ter shoot yer through ther head."

"Oh, come off mit your voolishness! I pets me your life dot bistol vam't loaded."

At this Cole gave the fearless Dutchman a savage shake.

"You derved thick-headed fool!" he snarled.

"I believe I will have to shoot you before you will understand that you are in danger of kicking the bucket."

"I nefer kicks noddings no more. Since I dried to kick dot shackmules und stood on der schmall uf my packs I haf svared off on kickin'.

Vonce more I pegs you to ogcuse me v'ile I surrounds dot peers."

"Ye hain't goin' ter drink no beer."

"V'y nod?"

"Because I say so."

"Vell, id sthicks me v'at vas der madder mit you. You must haf von gum boils on your prain. I would rather hav von hundret tollars than pe such a plamed vool as you vas. I pets me you esgapes from some loonertentary asylum."

For a moment it did seem that Cole would shoot the reckless Dutchman. It was plain the ruffian had hard work to restrain his desire to put a bullet through Fritz's head. But for the probability that the affair would end in a tragedy, the crowd would have been convulsed with laughter; as it was, they were on the verge of an outburst.

"Let me take a han' thar."

A six-foot ruffian who was known in Damascus as Hank Irons—sometimes "Iron Hank"—elbowed his way through the crowd.

"Ther Dutch son of a gun wants somethin' ter driok," he said, "so let's fill him an' ther mule with whisk'. We'll guv 'em a good time."

The idea of getting both Fritz and the mule drunk and then having some sport with them met the approbation of the spectators, the most of whom did not care to see the little Dutchman injured.

But, Fritz did not favor the scheme.

"I dinks I haf somedings to say apoud dot coot dimes meinseluf. V'en I orters peer, I dakes peer. I vas nod trinkin' viskys shust

apoud now, und dot mule always trinks der same v'at I do. It vill pe onhealthy for der veller v'at vools mit dot peasts. He haf somedings vorse than tynermite goncealed mit his hindt paws."

Iron Hank rapped on the bar with his knuckles.

"Two bottles of chain-lightnin'," he ordered.

The barkeeper hastened to set down two bottles of vile whisky, extracting the corks at a motion from Hank. The big bully passed one of the bottles to Cole, saying:

"Turn thet inter ther Dutchman."

Then he grasped the other and moved toward the mule.

Fritz grinned and winked at the crowd.

"Shust keeb your vedder eyes beeled," he observed, in a stage whisper, holding one hand to the side of his mouth as if to keep Irons and Cole from hearing. "If you don'd see some circuses in apoudt no dimes ad all I vas a vool. You petter gid pack oud uf der vay ven Fritz und der mules gids to movin'. Oh, mine cracious! vat a bicnicks!"

As Irons approached, the mule arose to its feet and stood eying the bottle doubtfully. According to orders, Rush Cole seized the other bottle and grasped Fritz by the shoulder, growling:

"Open your hash-trap, you infernal Dutchman."

At about that moment Iron Hank grabbed at the mule's bridle, saying:

"Whoa, there! Stand still an' take yer bitters, or I'll—"

Just what Hank thought of doing if the animal did not stand still and take its "bitters" the crowd never learned, for, with a squeal like the blast of a steam-whistle, the mule whirled and launched out with its heels. Plainly the creature was an expert in that line, for it made a very fine calculation. Hank had whirled to dart out of the way, but he was not quick enough. The mule's heels struck the big fellow's pantaloons about ten inches below the back-strap, and Hank was lifted bodily into the air and hurled forward upon his stomach.

Fritz was not idle.

"Der enderdainments vos gommenced."

With a sudden and unexpected movement, he grasped Rush Cole by the collar and a convenient part of the breeches and, lifting the paralyzed tough from his feet, threw him over behind the bar!

"Pless my soul!" he exclaimed, in apparent surprise. "Dot vas easy as noddin' ad all. Vas there some more uf dose beebles in here somevares v'at wants to haf some fun mit Fritz und der mule? Don'd pe pasketfulls, shentlemen; ve can make him agreeable vor ycu."

For a moment there was a dead silence—the silence of amazement. Then Hank Irons scrambled to his feet with a furious roar, snatching out a knife.

"I'll cut that cussed mule's throat!" he howled.

"Come on, boys! We'll wipe out both ther Dutchman an' ther mule!"

In answer to his cry Rush Cole came scrambling back over the bar and three more figures sprang out from the crowd. The two ruffians were reinforced by Pistol Pete, Webb Spotty and Pedro, a Mexican, making in all five of the hardest characters in Damascus.

"Vade right in!" shouted the gritty little Dutchman, spitting on his hands. "I pets you somet'ings dot Fritz und der mule vill make him lifely vor der crowd."

And they did. Rush Cole did not get fairly over the bar before the Dutchman tossed him back again. Then Fritz waded in to help the mule dispose of the remaining four. The mule was not asleep, by any means. Squealing viciously and showing its teeth, it charged for Iron Hank as soon as that hard case showed an inclination to resume hostilities. Hank darted to one side and Webb Spotty struck at the mule with a knife. But the animal seemed to have more than one pair of eyes. Out flew one of its rear hoofs, catching Spotty in the stomach and sending him sprawling and howling with pain.

"Dot's der vay ve do him!" laughed Fritz, as he followed the mule's example and lifted the Mexican with a powerful kick. "Ve are der lifely poyms mit der feet uf us. Id ish nod ofen dot I runs me acrost such a sblendid bicnicks. Shust vatch dot mule! Mein Cott! don'd dot vas a sighd vor sore eyes!"

Irons was having all he could do to keep out of the mule's reach, and he found no opportunity to strike the animal with the knife. Pistol Pete was chasing the mule, but was taking care not to share Spotty's fate. It was a comical sight, and the crowd roared with laughter.

Fritz joining in heartily, slapping his thigh and shouting:

"Dot vas der pest games uf shase v'at I never saw. Shust wait dill they comes roundt ag'in und see me ubstot dot veller v'at don't dry so very hart to catch dot mules."

A moment later Irons and the mule dodged past. Pete followed and Fritz skillfully tripped the pistol expert, catching him up and tossing him over the bar to land on Cole, who had been so stunned that he was just rising to his feet.

"Peessness vas peessness," observed Fritz, "und id vas our peessness to make him inderrestin' vor dose vellers v'at dinks they haf some coot dimes mit us. Loog oud!"

Thrusting out his foot again, he tripped Hank Irons, the knife flying from the bully's hand as he went down.

The mule came to a sudden stop with the bully beneath its nose. Reaching down, the creature seized the slack of Hank's pantaloons in its teeth and lifted the kicking and pawing tough from the floor, while the spectators shouted themselves hoarse with laughter.

Never had there been such a "racket" in the Sweet Buttercup.

Giving Irons a swing in the air, the animal dropped him to the floor, and the bully scrambled away just in time to escape the creature's heels. Then the mule gave a triumphant "hee-haw" and settled back serenely on its haunches, the field appearing to be cleared of its enemies.

"Cott pless me, how I lofes dot mules!" cried Fritz, rushing forward and claspings the animal around the neck with both arms. "I dinks I pelieve I don'd like him vonce, but I shange mein mindt now. He vas der pest mule v'at I aefer saw. Yaw, dot vas so!"

But, the trouble was not over.

A cry of warning came from the crowd.

The treacherous Mexican had darted up behind the little Dutchman's back and was on the point of stabbing the unguarded fellow with a long, slender knife!

Fritz could not have avoided the deadly stroke, but at that moment a pistol shot was heard and the Mexican fell to the floor with a bullet in his brain!

Following the shot the stillness of death pervaded the room.

It was broken by a voice that came from a point no one seemed able to locate.

"This is Violet Vane's first blow at the Serpent Six! The remaining five are doomed!"

"Mein Cott! I stays no longer here aroundt!" cried Fritz.

The mule arose. He leaped upon its back, and both shot out through the open doorway.

CHAPTER IV.

DUKE HAS CALLERS.

"I HAVE seen the most of the men, Mr. Duke."

"With what result, Swift?"

"Nearly all will return to work in the morning."

"Good!"

The conversation took place in Horatio Duke's business apartment at his residence in Damascus on the evening of the day that witnesses the mining trouble in the little town. Bayard Swift, Duke's mine superintendent, had come in to report to his employer. He was a smart, able-appearing young man.

"Did you inform them there was to be no reduction?"

"I did."

"How is Darke, of the Bengal Tiger?"

"Obstinate; he refuses to make any concession."

"I do not suppose you have been able to discover who circulated the report that there was to be a cut-down in the Royal Duke!"

"I have not, but I hope to do so in a day or two. It is certain to leak out. Your enemies will not be able to keep themselves forever hidden."

"I trust not. Have you anything further to report?"

"I have not."

"You have done well. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

Having been thus curtly dismissed, Swift at once withdrew, Mr. Duke resuming his writing at his desk.

Neither Duke nor his caller had seen the face of a man who was peering in at an open window and listening to the entire conversation. This person waited till Bayard Swift had left the house, and then he placed his hands on the window sill and prepared to enter the room.

Hearing a soft noise behind him, Mr. Duke whirled swiftly and then sprung to his feet as he

saw a strange man sitting in the open window with his feet within the room. Like a flash the mine-owner's hand flew to his breast pocket and out leaped a revolver.

The man in the window laughed.

"Go a little slow, Charlie," he said, coolly.

Duke recoiled a step, his face paling.

"Who are you?" he demanded, harshly. "I will have you—"

"Oh, no you won't, Charlie."

"Who are you?" the startled mine-owner repeated.

"One who knows your record," was the insolent reply.

Horatio Duke's face flushed and then turned very white.

"Get out of this room!" he commanded, angrily. "Go out the way you came. I do not know you."

"You are mistaken."

"Will you go?"

"Do not be in such a rush, old boy. Can it be you have always moved in a hurry since you skipped from Pittsburg so lively?"

Horatio Duke trembled from head to foot, but controlled his shaken nerves by a powerful effort.

"I do not understand you," he declared, his voice sounding harsh and unnatural.

"Oh, yes you do!" laughed the ragged, unkempt fellow in the window. "You understand me very well, Charles Derril.—Hold! Lift that revolver and I bore you through!"

With amazing swiftness the impudent stranger produced a revolver from some part of his tattered garments, and covered the magnate of Damascus. There was a dangerous glitter in his eyes that caused the furious mine-owner to hesitate, even though the desire to shoot the fellow was almost beyond Duke's control.

"Hold yourself steady, old man," cautioned the stranger, as if he realized how difficult a thing it was for Duke to restrain his passion.

"Don't try it unless you want a through ticket to Kingdom Come. I can snuff you out by crooking my finger."

Like a cornered and beaten beast, the mine-owner glared at the individual who held the drop. Finally, he said, very slowly:

"To whom am I to attribute the honor of, this call?"

"Can it be you do not know me now?" laughed the stranger. "Well, I scarcely wonder. The last time you saw me you were a fugitive from justice, and I was a sleek, well-dressed and highly respected business-man. Things have changed since then. These clothes are enough to disguise me, but this beard helps out wonderfully. However, you should know my voice. Perhaps if I stand you will take a tumble to me."

The man arose from the window, and barely had he straightened to his full height when Horatio Duke uttered an exclamation of amazement, and clutched at the back of a chair as if for support.

"Jim!" he cried.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the man who had entered at the window. "So you recognize me at last. But how is this? You do not seem very pleased to see your own half-brother. As far as we know, the same man was the father of us both—and a confounded rascal he was, too!"

"Jim, why are you here?"

"For the same reason you came to me once—protection. You were fleeing from the officers of the law. What had you done? Oh, yes! Forged another man's name."

"Stop! That is forever in the past."

"Whew! Is that so? I wonder if you have settled with the parties whose pelt you slashed so unmercifully?"

"That is nothing to you."

"You are mistaken; it is everything to me. I am in the same plight that you were when you asked my protection."

"What have you done?"

"Well, ahem! To be honest, my offense is a little more serious. It was a bank cashier who foolishly caused me trouble in getting at the funds of the concern. It was an accident. They said his funeral was a grand affair."

"My God—murder!"

"Oh, come now! that is really an unpleasant word. I tell you it was an accident."

"But your hands are stained with human blood!"

"Now don't git the horrors like that. I could hang my hat on your eyes. I wonder if I look that way when I am frightened. You know people used to say we looked very much alike in the old days. Perhaps it would be so now if this ragged beard were removed and I were dressed in decent clothes."

Duke made an impatient gesture.

"Don't speak of that!" he cried. "It puts an unpleasant taste into my mouth."

The ragged man laughed sneeringly.

"Oh, it does, does it? So you have become mighty fine since dodging the police of Pittsburg! You have no cause to put on frills with me, but I don't care. The question is: Will you hide and shelter me till the bloodhounds of the law lose the scent? One of them is hot on my trail now."

"No, I will not."

"What?"

"You heard and understood. I will have nothing to do with a murderer, even though he be a son of my father."

The ragged man whistled softly.

"Perhaps you can be induced," he insinuated.

"No. You have no power over me. I know my name is dishonored in my old home, but the debt has been settled and I have the pledge of the man whom I wronged that he will not molest me."

"But for old times—"

"Old times are nothing to me. You refused me shelter and protection when I called on you, and I was forced to skulk and hide like a hunted dog."

"But I did not dare—"

"I would not shelter you if I dared."

For several seconds the two men glared straight into each other's eyes, then the one addressed as Jim snarled:

"All right! Do as you please, curse you! But if you think you can use me thus and not rue it, you are mistaken. I have found you here an honored man in this place, but if I choose I can drag your name in the filth of the street! Do you defy me?"

"I do!"

"That settles it! But listen to me. As true as my name is James Derril—as true as there is a God—you shall repent this moment in tears of blood! You do not know me. There is a devil in me of which you do not dream, and you have aroused it to-night. You are rich. Every dollar you possess shall be mine! I swear it!"

"Enough, you cur!" cried Horatio Duke, sternly. "I will listen to no more. You came in at the window, and you may go as you came. It will be the worse for you if you ever cross my path again. Go!"

"Yes, I will go, but do not forget my words."

And without another word of parting, the fugitive from justice sprung out through the window and disappeared in the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER V.

THE VAILED LADY AND THE MYSTERIOUS VOICE.

AFTER leaving Horatio Duke's house Bayard Swift, the young mine superintendent, walked rapidly along the main street of Damascus till he was directly in front of the Sweet Buttercup Saloon, where he was met by Royal Norman. The young men greeted each other cordially, and Norman asked:

"How do things move, Swift?"

"Finely," was the reply. "The men will return to work in the morning."

"All of them?"

"There may be a few exceptions, but they will be very few. The ones who will remain out are the very ones we do not care about having in our employ. It is possible that Mr. Duke's enemies will betray themselves in that manner."

"You have not been able to learn who circulated the false report in regard to the cut-down?"

"No; but I hope to learn the truth soon."

"I hope you will."

"I have just come from Mr. Duke's."

"Indeed. And did you see—Meta?"

"I did not. You will have to go round yourself if you wish to learn anything of her, Norman."

"It will not do to call too often, you know."

At this moment the figure of a lady who was closely veiled passed them and, after a moment's hesitation, entered the saloon.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Swift.

"What is it?"

"That lady."

"I saw her, and I fancy she is one in whom you take a great interest. It was the singular lady whom the citizens of Damascus have designated as 'the Veiled Mystery.'"

"I thought so; but what can she want in there? She does not frequent such places. I will follow her."

The young superintendent hurried into the saloon, leaving Royal Norman muttering:

"There is something singular about that pair."

They know each other well, but Damascus knows very little of either. Swift showed himself a capable man to fill the place of Mr. Duke's former superintendent, Davis, who was killed by the fall of rock, and so he obtained his position in the Royal Duke. At about that time this singular veiled woman first appeared in town. They may not be man and wife, but if I am not mistaken the time may come when they will be."

Although it was yet early in the evening, the saloon was thronged with the striking miners. Bayard Swift pushed his way through the crowd, peering anxiously around for the veiled lady. But he saw nothing of her till he came to the part of the room where the card-tables were. There he found her seated quite alone at a table. She saw him, and made a motion for him to approach.

"Sit down, Frank," she said, in a low, pleasant voice. "I was looking for you."

"And did you come here for such a purpose?" he asked, banteringly, a warm light in his eyes, and an unmistakable thrill in his voice.

"Not exactly," she confesses, as he sat down opposite her. "But I had a strong incitant to come here."

"You must have had, for I know you detest such places. I was amazed when I saw you enter the door."

"Then you saw me come in?"

"Yes. I was talking with Royal Norman in front of the saloon. I followed you at once."

"Oh, you did?" half-laughed the veiled lady. "I suppose you thought it best to keep an eye on me?"

Swift smiled, but the warm light in his eyes deepened.

"I did not know but you were looking after some other fellow," he acknowledged, jestingly.

"You scarcely dream how near the truth you were."

The smile faded slowly from his face.

"What do you mean?" he faltered.

"That I was looking after another fellow," she confessed.

His lips came together firmly, and he stared hard at the veil which hid her face.

"I wish I could see your face now," he finally said, his voice low and hard.

"Ah, you are jealous!" came from beyond the baffling veil.

"Perhaps so. I am sure you are jesting, but such jests turn my heart to stone. I cannot bear them, for the thought of losing you after you have confessed that you love me best, even though another has a prior claim on you—the thought is enough to drive me mad. You know how I love you, my—"

"Hush! I know all, and you should know your love is returned. Have I not proved it to you by forever turning my back on my past life, and proving false to the one to whom I was pledged—the noble man who loves me with all his heart? I know I have done wrong, and my conscience troubles me constantly, but it is all for you—all for you!"

Her voice was low and soft—so low that any one standing within four feet of the table could not have understood her words. But in it there was a deep passion—a tender thrill of love that should have satisfied the most exacting lover.

The look on Bayard Swift's face changed.

"I cannot doubt you," he whispered, all a tremble with the intensity of his emotions. "You are mine, mine for all of the past! Fortune intended us for each other, but it came cruelly near placing a barrier between us. I wish to wrong no man, but I believe you rightfully belong to me. With such a faith, no human being can take you from me. I do not think you have done wrong."

"I am sure I have. I should not have surrendered to my love for you till I saw him and told him all. He loves me, but I believe he would have given me up if he knew I loved another more than I did him. He would not want an unwilling wife. But I have made a bad step, and now I must abide by the consequences. I shall never dare face him and tell him the truth."

"But I will."

"He will kill you! You must not!"

"I am able to take care of myself, and I am no robber of a man's sweetheart and promised wife. If he demands satisfaction, we will meet man to man and settle the affair."

"It would be madness! He is an expert with any kind of a weapon."

"I am not a novice. You must confess that is the only honorable course for me to pursue."

The Veiled Mystery was silent for several seconds.

"I suppose it is," she finally confessed; "but

it seems a terrible thing to me. Oh, Frank, Frank! he will surely kill you!"

"Fortune may favor me."

"And then he will be slain. All on my account! Great heavens! what have I done? Was there ever girl in such a position before?"

"Many of them. It has been their fortune from time immemorial. Hundreds of men have fought and slain each other for the possession of some fair lady love."

"But I cannot bear the thought of any one being killed on my account. If you were slain, I should have nothing more to live for; if he should fall, the memory would haunt me to my grave. Is there no way by which such a calamity may be avoided?"

"Possibly, but I can see no light now. If he finds us, the truth must be revealed. What will follow I cannot say. He is a man of strong passions, although usually as cool as ice, if all that I have heard of him is true. There is little doubt but he will demand a meeting."

"Then let's go away from here at once—far away where he will never be able to find us."

"And abandon our mission of vengeance?"

She clasped her hands convulsively and bowed her head. For several seconds she remained thus, then she spoke coldly, firmly:

"No. I forgot for an instant why we are here. The dead must be avenged. He would not rest easy in his grave were we to allow his murderers to escape. We must stay whatever comes."

"That is a sensible decision. I am certain every one of the dastardly band is in Damascus, and I think I have them all spotted except their captain. If I am right, some one got ahead of us and ended the career of one of them to-day."

"How was that?"

"One of the men whom I suspected was shot dead in this very saloon to-day."

"Who did it?"

"That is a mystery. The person who fired the shot was not seen by any one within the saloon, and no one seemed able to locate him."

"That was strange."

"It was, indeed."

"Who was the man killed?"

"A Mexican called Pedro."

"There was a Mexican in the band."

"But I had almost forgotten you said you came here to meet somebody."

"I beg your pardon, but I did not say so. I said I came here to look for somebody."

"Who?"

"The very person whose appearance we both dread."

"Violet Vane?"

"Yes."

"You must have heard—"

"I have heard the rumor that he is in town, although no one seems to have seen him. He must be in disguise, but I do not think he can disguise himself so I would not know him. I came here to watch the people, feeling sure he would visit the place if he had reached Damascus."

Swift was silent several moments, apparently thinking. He soon seemed to arrive at a decision, and he said frankly:

"I did not wish you to suspect the truth so soon, but as it is I will try to conceal nothing. I believe Violet Vane shot the Mexican, Pedro. In fact, a voice was heard declaring it was his first blow at the Serpent Six. No one could tell from what point the voice came, but without a doubt Violet Vane is in Damascus."

And seemingly from the empty air above the heads of Bayard Swift and the veiled lady fell these words:

"You are right, Frank Fenton; Violet Vane is in this very saloon!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE OWNER OF THE MULE.

SCARCELY had Bayard Swift disappeared within the Sweet Buttercup Saloon when Royal Norman felt a touch upon his arm, and, whirling swiftly, he was able to make out the figure of "The People's Poet," J. Milton Mole.

"I beg your grace if I encroach;
Don't turn your face from my approach.
If you will listen standing here,
I'll speak a word into your ear."

chanted the rhymester, striking an attitude of appeal.

"Go on with your say," laughed Royal; "but for heaven's sake do not give us too much of that sort of stuff. I do not wish to flatter you, but your verse is really too valuable to waste in such a reckless manner."

"Thanks, many thanks," bowed Mole, with his hand on his heart. "The Muse at times I would restrain, but find my efforts all in vain.

There—there it is, sir! It will slip out in ordinary conversation. I cannot help the things I say, and all because I'm built that way. It is very mortifying, but I suspect it is because I am nature's own poet. I'm often forced to talk in verse both good and bad—and sometimes worse. That's the way it will come. I am not really responsible."

"I trust not. But what did you wish to say to me?"

"I hope with me you will go in
To yonder gilded place of sin.
I hate to go
Alone, you know,
So your consent I hope to win."

"That is it concisely, put in ear-charming verse. It is your company I desire, for I am naturally averse to entering such a place alone." Royal hesitated a moment. He had thought of following Swift into the saloon, and he finally decided to accompany the poet. When he was aware of this, Mole became quite profuse with his thanks.

"I shall be under great obligations to you, sir," he declared. "I am naturally of a timid disposition, and I know a man is liable to lose his scalp, figuratively speaking, in such a place. With some one whom I know to accompany me I feel much bolder. It puts considerable stiffening into my backbone."

Together the two men entered the saloon.

"It's seldom, sir, I do indulge,
But now I am afraid
At your request I'd be induced
To take some lemonade."

ventured Mr. Mole, as they strolled past the bar.

Royal laughed.

"I am sorry," he said, "but if you do not drink anything stronger than lemonade, I fear you will have to remain thirsty. They do not keep so mild a beverage here. Whisky straight is pretty nearly the universal drink."

"A drink so vile allures me not;
I leave it for the wretched sot."

"That settles it, then, and I am in the price of a drink. I never take anything myself."

"I am glad to hear you say so, young man. Beware of the wine when it is red, for it is a deceiver that will play the best of them foul. But I would inquire if you have seen anything of my traveling companion, the Dutch gentleman?"

"I have not set eyes on him since that mule carried him down the trail into town."

"I am looking for him in vain. He seems to have vanished. Ah!"

Mr. Mole stopped in his tracks and stood staring straight at Bayard Swift, who was talking with the veiled lady at one of the card-tables.

"What is it?" inquired Royal.

"That young man yonder. Perchance I have seen him before. At least, it seems thus to me. Who is he, may I ask?"

"The one talking with the veiled lady?"

"The same, sir."

"That is Bayard Swift, Horatio Duke's mine superintendent."

"Thank you. And another thing: How long has he been a resident of Damascus?"

"But a short time. I do not think I can tell exactly how long at present."

"And the lady with whom he is conversing?"

"Appeared in town at about the same time he did."

"Who is she?"

"No one knows. She is called the Veiled Mystery."

"Ha, ha! I think, perchance,
I scent a strange romance.
(That rhyme is pat!)
Why should the lady there
Her face conceal with care?
Now tell me that."

"You have asked me too much," confessed Royal. "But perhaps she would tell you if you asked her in rhyme."

The poet looked startled.

"I would not dare," he declared. "I am a very bashful man, sir. But, if you choose, we will stroll past them so I may get a closer view of the young man's face."

As Royal and Mole passed the place where the young miner superintendent and his veiled companion were sitting, the poet heard Swift declare that Violet Vane was in town. Norman and the rhymester passed on without witnessing the consternation of the couple at the card table as they heard the strange voice in the air.

"I am sure I have seen him before," declared J. Milton, when they were safely beyond the point where they might be overheard by

the person of whom he was speaking. "But what troubles me now is where my Dutch companion can be."

"Perhaps you may soon learn. Look there."

In at the open door of the saloon came the tricky mule. There was no one with the beast, but it did not seem in the least concerned on that account. Regardless of the attention it was attracting, it ambled slowly into the room, glancing around as if in search for some one. There was something about the singular beast that set the greater part of the crowd to smiling at once.

In front of the bar the mule stopped and tossed its head three times in a nodding fashion, while it seemed to eye the barkeeper in a beseeching manner.

"Begorra! the b'aste is bowing t' yez, Johnny!" shouted an Irishman in the crowd. "Doon't yez know the relations av ye, marn alove?"

When the merriment caused by this had somewhat abated, another individual cried:

"The mule nodded three times, which is a call for three fingers, of course. Set it out, Johnny."

J. Milton Mole approached the animal. Striking an attitude in front of the beast, the poet perpetrated his usual rhyme:

"I have a question to propound:
Where can thy master now be found?"

"Hee-haw!" brayed the mule, in a manner that would have made a fog-horn turn green with envy.

Barely had that fiendish bray escaped from the beast's throat when in at the door rushed a little woman who was attired in a green gingham dress and wore an old-fashioned sun-bonnet and a faded crimson shawl.

"Landy sakes to goodness!" she cried, shrilly. "If I didn't think I heard the voice of my dear Moses! Can it be I was received? No, no! There is the dear, darling, lovely, blessed creature! Oh, what a moment of joy and exuberation!"

She made a dash for the mule and clasped it round the neck, while she planted a kiss on the creature's head fairly between its eyes.

"Oh, Moses, Moses!" she sobbed, chokingly; "how could you have the heart to disband me the way you did! Oh, you naughty, naughty thing! When I heard your sweet voice I run in here so fast that I am all out of breathe."

She produced a handkerchief half as large as a baby's crib-blanket and rubbed her eyes vigorously with it, sobbing convulsively all the time.

"I'm so recited that I'm on the p'int of going into highderricks," she confessed, clinging about the mule's neck with one arm. "I never expected to overcome you no more, Moses. I thought you was gone beyond discovery, for I felt sure some horrid man had disappropriated you. We'll never be disbanded any more, will we, darling?"

The mule did not display emotion of any sort. Finally, the little woman glanced around her.

"Goodness sakes to gracious!" she exclaimed, a look of horror settling on her face. "If I haven't meambled right into a whole nest of men! Why, I never saw such a congregating of the masculine generation before! It is a terribly motterfying position for a poor lonely female woman to be in, and you are to blame for it all, you horrid bad mule! You just wait till I have the occasional and see if I don't train you for this!"

With the thumb and fore-finger of his left hand touching his chin and his right hand behind his back, J. Milton Mole ventured to ask:

"Are you the owner of this mule, madam?"

The little woman turned on the poet with a snap.

"What's that to you, sir?" she demanded, shrilly, her eyes flashing. "What right have you to redress any remarks to me? I have never been introduced to you, and thank goodness! I have no desire to such an aspiration. You're nothing but a common every-day man, and if there is anything in this round hemmyspear I do detest it is a man! So there, now!"

Mr. Mole seemed to shrink several degrees beneath her withering scorn, but he plucked up courage to falter faintly:

"I—I beg your pardon, ma'am, but I am not a common every-day man."

The owner of the mule looked amazed.

"What?" she snapped. "You are not a common man? Then, sir, have the goodness to susplain what you are. Perhaps you're an angel."

"Not quite, ma'am, not quite. Although you may not know it, I am a natural poet."

"Oh, that's it! Well, if there is anything

meaner and more disgustable than a common man it is a manuel poet who is drozzling and druling over schoolgirl verses all the time. Such a critter hain't fit to stand in a corn-field to scare the crows. That's my idee, and you are welcome to the opinion of Miss Mehitable Annable Miggles. Come, Moses, we will preamble out of this den of unmentionables."

And, followed by the mule, Miss Miggles marched sedately out of the Sweet Buttercup Saloon.

CHAPTER VII.

"NUMBER TWO"—"VIOLET VANE MUST DIE!"

As J. Milton Mole was endeavoring to slip quietly out of the saloon, about fifteen minutes after the departure of Miss Miggles and Moses, Fritz Schricker came rushing in at the door. The poet and the little Dutchman collided, recoiled, and sat down on the floor with a suddenness and solidness that forced grunts from the lips of both.

"Dunder und blitzens!" gurgled Fritz.

"A fall, a crash; we're down, by gash," murmured Mole. "And we came down as if we meant to stay," he added.

"Ah, there!" exclaimed Fritz, in surprise, as he recognized the poet.

"Stay there," returned the rhymester, promptly, as he carefully felt of different parts of his body with his hands as if examining to see if anything was broken.

"V'y you runs me into, don'd id?" demanded the Dutchman.

"I think so myself," confessed Mole.

"Dot don'd ogsblain my qvestions. I d'inks berhaps I hear somedings drop shust apoud a short dimes ago, und then I finds minseluf down mit der floor mit mein prains almost pu'sted vide opens. I don'd ogsactly understands v'at vas der madder mit dot girls calt Hannah."

"I was going out—"

"Und I vas comin' in."

"We collided."

"Who vas dot?"

"Don't you understand? We came together forcibly."

"Vell, I shouldt d'inks so minseluf."

"And then we sat down."

"Oh, yaw! Berhaps you vas tiredt, but I don'd know v'at vor I sod down."

"The shock caused you to fall."

"Der shocks? Vell, dot ogsplains him. I d'inks berhaps I vas peen voolin' mit von elegdric patteryrs. Und dit I hit you?"

"You did."

"Und you d'inks you vas dryin' to knock der stuff's out uf some elegdric patteryrs?"

"The sensation was somewhat like that."

"Vell, then, I gifes you your abologies. I vas gladt I did nod preak your pack. Dot vas von more narrow escapes vor Fritz. I vas trunning like dunder to gid away vrom dot vomans v'at haf dot mules. V'en I glaimes dot peast as mein own dot vomans lighd on der scuff uf mein neck on und comes britty near knockin' uf me der packinsoudt. I vas gladt to gid away vrom her, don'd id?"

"Very likely. She is a very dangerous female."

"Then you haf seen dot vomans?"

"I should say so! Figuratively speaking, she gave me a great going over."

"Ish dot so?" grinned Fritz. "Then ve vas bot' in der same poxes. Shage hants."

Bending forward, without rising, the Dutchman and the poet clasped hands.

"Now," suggested Fritz, "you pulls like plazes, und I pulls like plazes, und ve bot' gids our feed on. Allretty, now. There, dot vas der stuff!"

When they were fairly on their feet they continued to shake hands vigorously.

"I dinks ve must haf a peer on dot," said Fritz. "You must come ub und dake somedings mit your uncles."

Locking arms with Mole, the Dutchman led him toward the bar.

"But I never take anything stronger than lemonade," protested the poet.

"Gid oudt! Von leetle peers vill do you some good."

But the barkeeper informed them he had nothing so mild as beer.

"Then gif us visky," said Fritz, promptly.

"You pets mein poots I tages somedings ven I vants him."

Despite the poet's protests, Fritz turned out a glass of whisky for him.

"Id vill do you goot. Id vas a gread things vor dose beebles vat invents boetry. Shust gif us von leetle verses on him."

"Well," sighed Mole, as he lifted the glass, "your ways are so persuasive I cannot resist."

"Here's to the drink that Satan brews,—
Bad luck is in the glass,—
Who drinks it down vill manhood lose,
But down it goes—alas!"

"Holt on, holt on!" cried Fritz. "Dot vas britty goot, but I dinks I tries him once. I vas nod much uf a boets, bud here coes:

"Here's to der stuff vat mages you veel
You nefer hat some wees;
Too much uf him vill mage you reel
Und paint quite redt your nose."

"How vas dot vor high? Swaller your pit-ters."

"Ah, that warms a man's stomach!" exclaimed the poet, as soon as he could catch his breath after swallowing the fiery liquid.

"Und rakes der skin off der whole length uf his throats," added Fritz, catching his breath convulsively. "I haf trinked all kindts uf stuff, but I nefer hat von engagements mit der equals uf him. Dot vas somedings like gommitting suicide mit a dull razors. Berhaps I don'd vant some more uf dot, I guesses."

At this moment there was a commotion in the vicinity of the card tables, causing every one to turn swiftly in that direction.

Bayard Swift and the veiled lady had arisen to leave the room when Hank Irons suddenly sprang in front of the girl.

"This hyer's gittin' too thin," cried the ruffian. "Thar can't no pettycoat come inter this town and keep her face covered so people can't see it."

Before Swift could make a move to prevent, the cowardly wretch tore the veil from the lady's face, revealing the pale but handsome countenance of a girl of nineteen or twenty. The next instant the mine superintendent leaped upon the ruffian and a savage struggle ensued.

The crowd surged toward the point of excitement, Fritz and Mole going with the rest.

"I pets zwi tollars I dakes some hands in dot!" exclaimed the little Dutchman.

But before Fritz could reach the two men they were torn apart by the swaying crowd.

Suddenly Webb Spotty appeared behind the little Dutchman and aimed a savage blow at his back with a gleaming knife.

Then J. Milton Mole proved his usefulness.

Out shot the poet's fist, striking Spotty fairly beneath the ear.

It happened that there was a clear space in that vicinity, and the would-be assassin was knocked headlong to the floor.

He fell fairly on the knife with which he had sought to end Fritz Schricker's life. A hollow groan came from his lips and he made no attempt to arise.

A just and speedy retribution had overtaken him, for the blade had reached a vital spot.

As the crowd stood staring stupidly at the fallen man these words were plainly heard:

"This is number two of the *Serpent Six!*
There are four more to follow!"

It was the voice of Violet Vane!

By the light of some flaring and smoking torches four persons were gathered in a small cave. All wore masks and were attired in black. On their breasts were coiled blood-red serpents.

They were the four survivors of the *Serpent Six*.

"There is but one thing about it," growled one of the masks, "something must be done at once or we are all doomed."

"That's so," agreed another. "What have you to propose, captain?"

"There is but one thing to be done," responded the leader.

"What is that?"

"Our enemies must be exterminated."

"Who are our enemies?"

"We know one of them, at least."

"Swift, as he is now called?"

"Yes, Swift—the Frank Fenton of the old band. Our traitor lieutenant."

"You think he has spotted us?"

"Certainly; he knew you despite the slight changes you have made in your appearance. I think he has been keeping quiet to get his grip on me first. For no other reason can I account for his inaction."

"Do you think he helped ther gal escape from this cave?"

"No, it is plain she escaped through Pedro's negligence. He got beastly full, and amounted to nothing as a guard. How soon Fenton found her after she left this place it is impossible to tell, but it is certain she has never been able to lead him here. I was certain she was the strange veiled lady even before you tore the covering from her face, Hank."

"So wuz I," declared Irons. "But sech

derned luck I never saw. Ther hull blamed game went foul. Cole was ter knife Fenton, while Spotty wiped out ther Dutchman. Cole didn't git at Fenton at all, an' thet blamed long-haired poet knocked Spotty onter his own knife."

"Yes, it was a botch job," said the chief. "We shall not miss Pedro so much, but Spotty was a good man."

"An' both wuz done up since thet derned Dutchman struck ther town."

"You believe the Dutchman is at the bottom of it all?"

"I believe ther Dutchman's Violet Vane hisself!"

"It may be; but, who is the poet?"

"A fool or a detective."

"Well," said the leader, "it is my advice that we devote our entire attention to the traitor, Frank Fenton, and to Violet Vane. When those two men are out of the way there will be clear sailing, but of the two, Vane is much the more dangerous. It is our duty to wipe out Fenton, anyway; but first, let's dispose of Violet Vane. He must die!"

And the others cried, savagely:

"Yes, Violet Vane must die!"

CHAPTER VIII.

DUKE CHANGES HIS MIND.

In the morning Damascus was treated to another sensation.

Horatio Duke, it was said, had changed his mind in regard to the cut-down. Instead of paying his men the same wages as before he had decided to make a reduction similar to that made in the Bengal Tiger.

Notices to this effect, signed in Duke's handwriting, were found posted on the buildings at the mouth of the mine by the men who were returning to work.

No one was more surprised than Bayard Swift. He could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes when he saw the notices. He thought of his talk with Mr. Duke the night before and became convinced there was something crooked about the affair. He did not think it possible the mine-owner had changed his mind so quickly. Besides that, if Mr. Duke had changed his mind, why had he not notified his superintendent at once?

Of Swift the excited miners demanded an explanation.

"You said there was to be no cut-down," said one brawny fellow, pushing forward and confronting the superintendent in a threatening manner. "What do them notices mean?"

"You can answer that question as well as I, Dolby," declared Bayard, looking the man square in the eyes. "I was told yesterday by Horatio Duke himself that there was to be no reduction, and I was instructed to notify the men to that effect. I did as I was directed, and only last evening Mr. Duke assured me I had done well. There is some trickery here somewhere."

"That is what we think," agreed the spokesman of the miners, "and we want to know who is responsible. When we find out, some one will be pretty sure to hear from us. We are peaceable, hard-working men who earn every dollar we receive. Up to the present trouble we have had no reason to complain of Mr. Duke. We left the mine when we were assured he meant to make the same cut-down as that enforced in the Bengal Tiger, by that skinflint Darke. When you assured us nothing of the kind was intended by the Duke, we decided we had been hasty and had allowed our feelings to lead us into a bad move, so we said at once we'd go back in the morning. Here we are, and here"—pointing at the notice—"is what we find."

"I do not believe Mr. Duke had anything to do with this," declared Swift, desperately. "It is a trick perpetrated by the same foul brain that started the false story of the reduction in the Royal Duke."

"We will hope that is so," said the big miner, calmly. "If it is, there will be derned little harm done. If it is not—Wal, we hear Darke has sent to Ham Flat for Chinese miners. Ef thet is so and the onery heathen come here, there will be a very red time in Damascus. Our sympathies are with the Bengal Tiger men anyhow, and if we are in the same box, there is mighty apt to be warm times in this hyer camp. You hear me! We are nothin' but common workingmen, but we have our rights and we understand them. There are enough of us to run this camp, and if Horatio Duke is in with Skinflint Darke against us, we may take the reins into our hands. If we do, there will be two ruined men and the initials of their names will be Duke and Darke. But we did not come

here to make threats. We came to work, and if that notice is a forgery we are ready to go in to the shaft. We want to know the truth."

"And you shall as soon as I can make my way to Mr. Duke's house and return to this spot. I will not be gone long."

Bayard started at a run and in less than ten minutes stood panting at Horatio Duke's door, on which he rapped vigorously. In a few moments the magnate's Irish man-servant appeared.

"Is Mr. Duke up, Mike?" asked the superintendent.

"He is."

"Then I must see him."

"It is ag'in' his orders, if yez plaze."

"But I must see him. It is on very important business."

"Faith an' I kin not hilp thit. He has instructed me not t' distarb him."

"But if he knew who it was—"

"Thit would make no difference at all, at all."

"It is on important business," cried Bayard, desperately.

"Thit's all roight. It makes me think thit he lift this little bit av an invylope fer the loikes av yez if ye sh'u'd carl."

Mike handed out a sealed envelope and then promptly closed the door.

With a sinking heart, Bayard opened the envelope and drew forth a sheet of foolscap paper, upon which was written:

"TO BAYARD SWIFT,

Superintendent of the Royal Duke Mine:—
"This is to notify you I have changed my mind in regard to the reduction of wages in the Royal Duke. The ten per cent cut-down will immediately go into effect. The men left the mine of their own accord when I made no mention of reducing their wages, therefore they remain out until they see fit to come in at the same scale to be enforced in the Bengal Tiger. Your pay will remain the same. Please see that every man is properly notified."

"HORATIO DUKE."

The superintendent crushed the sheet in his hand, his face turning very pale.

"The man is mad!" he muttered, hoarsely.

"I can scarcely believe it now. The change from his talk last night is too great. It will cause a riot in the place and there will surely be bloodshed. With the entire body of laborers striking, things will be thrown into a perfect turmoil. Gods! I am almost afraid to return to the men with such a report."

Hearing a slight noise above his head, he glanced up and saw Meta, Mr. Duke's adopted daughter, leaning out of the window just over the door. She pressed a finger against her red lips in a gesture of caution, and then said, speaking softly:

"Will you carry a message from me to Mr. Norman?"

"Of course I will," replied Bayard, promptly.

"Thank you," smiled the fair girl. "It is very important, and I know I can trust you. There is something the matter in the house."

"Something the matter?" repeated the young man. "What do you mean?"

"Hush! do not speak so loudly! I scarcely know what I mean, but I am frightened. Mr. Duke—papa—seems so unnatural. Oh, I know there is something wrong!"

"Have you seen him this morning?"

"Yes, I met him in the hall. He spoke to me, but his voice startled me. I feel as if some dreadful thing had happened."

"And a dreadful thing has happened. Mr. Duke has ordered the cut-down in the mine. There will be trouble and plenty of it."

"What can it mean?"

"That is a question I cannot answer. But what message do you wish me to carry to Royal Norman?"

"Give him this," and a white envelope fluttered down to be skillfully caught by the young man on the steps.

"I will do so. Good-morning."

He lifted his hat as he turned away and she waved her hand in a farewell gesture. A moment later the superintendent was walking rapidly down the street.

By good fortune the first person he met was Royal Norman. The young man was greatly amazed to learn of Duke's decision in regard to the reduction of wages, and when he opened the message from Meta he found it was a request to meet her at a certain point immediately after midday.

After conversing a moment concerning Horatio Duke's change of policy, the two young men separated, Swift hurrying on his way to carry the report to the waiting workmen at the Royal Duke.

If ever the superintendent dreaded a thing it

was his duty to do, he dreaded to tell the sturdy miners the truth that morning; but he did not flinch.

Loud and fierce were the curses that burdened the morning air when Bayard Swift had acknowledged that Horatio Duke had decided to enforce the ten per cent. reduction.

"We'll wipe this town out of existence!" cried more than one of the furious throng.

But Swift remained cool and collected, waiting till the uproar had ceased somewhat, when he ventured to make a brief speech. He cautioned the outraged men against being too hasty, saying he thought they could win the day without resorting to violence. He still insisted he believed there was something about Horatio Duke's change in policy that did not appear on the surface. He could not tell what it was, but he hoped Mr. Duke would come to his senses and continue to pay the wages given his employees in the past. In conclusion he assured them his sympathy was heartily with them and he would work for their interest to his utmost. But the speech awakened little enthusiasm.

That forenoon the streets of Damascus were thronged with the unemployed miners. They gathered in knots here and there and discussed the situation. Duke and Darke, the rival mine-owners, were universally condemned and in some quarters black threats were made openly. But at midday there had been no outbreak.

Royal Norman did not forget his appointment with Meta. Mounted on his splendid horse, he rode leisurely out of town and passed up the trail toward the point where he had met J. Milton Mole and Fritz Schricker the day before. He had not seen anything of Meta, therefore he was astonished when she suddenly confronted him in the trail, mounted on her favorite saddle-horse.

"Why, Meta!" he cried; "how came you here? I did not see you leave town."

"That is because I came by an unusual way," she explained, permitting him to press her hand. "I did not what to be seen coming here. If Papa Duke—"

"Now what has come over that man?" asked Royal, forgetting his courtesy in his sudden desire to learn the truth. "He has done a very foolish thing in declaring for the cut-down in his mine. That lets the entire mob of laborers in town loose, and such a band of reckless fellows are pretty sure to work damage of some sort."

Meta looked distressed. He saw this, and hastened to add:

"You are looking pale and disturbed, little one. What is it all about?"

"I do not think I can tell," she faltered; "but of one thing I am sure: something horrible took place at our house last night. What it was I do not know, but it worked a great change in Mr. Duke. For some reason I do not like to call him papa to-day. He is so changed! Why, he is not a single bit like himself! I am afraid of him. I would not have him find us together here for the world!"

Barely had the words left her lips when there came to their ears a clatter of hoofs and a horseman rode into view.

"It is he!" they both exclaimed, in a breath.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAGNATE'S ANGER—DUKE IN DANGER.

The magnate of Damascus rode directly toward the lovers, his face wearing a black look.

"Gracious!" gasped Meta. "He is dreadfully angry!"

Royal said nothing, but faced Duke quietly and resolutely.

The mine-owner drew rein a few feet from the young man and maiden, saying sharply:

"What does this mean?"

"Good-morning, Mr. Duke," saluted Royal, lifting his hat, respectfully.

"What does this mean?" repeated Duke.

"To what do you refer?" asked the young man, calmly.

Duke's face became still blacker.

"I refer to this secret meeting. Why was I not consulted in regard to such a thing?"

"Secret meeting? There is nothing secret about our meeting here, sir. I happened to ride this way and, most pleasantly for me, I came upon Miss Meta."

"Bah! I am too old not to understand such things. You knew you would meet her here; it was secretly arranged between you. Do you think I will permit such things?"

"I assure you, Mr. Duke—"

"You are avoiding my question, young man! Do you think I will permit such things?"

"In the past you have not objected to our as-

sociating with each other, and you surely knew with how much admiration I regarded Miss Meta. If you had not wished her to accept my attentions, you might have stopped it long ago; but you have given me every reason to think you were satisfied with the way things were going—"

"You have taken too much for granted, young man. Have I ever encouraged secret meetings between you?"

"You have not, for there have never been any such meetings."

"Till to-day, eh? Perhaps not, but having discovered this one, I am not certain about the past. It is plain you have led this child to deceive me or keep her moves secret from me in a measure at least. Such a thing I cannot pardon."

Royal turned red as fire, but struggled to smother his indignation.

"You are mistaken, Mr. Duke—"

"Oh, I am!" with great sarcasm. "You have the audacity to tell me that in such an insolent manner! Well, sir, I am now more than ever convinced I have been deceived in you."

"Oh, papa—" cried Meta; but he stopped her with an imperious gesture.

"Do not attempt to deceive me with a falsehood!" he exclaimed, with a harshness that chilled her blood. "What I have seen with my own eyes is enough for me. I fear I shall not be able to trust you in the future as I have in the past."

Meta's eyes filled with tears, but she choked back the sobs. She could scarcely believe this was the same man who had been so kind to her during the years since she had been left alone in the world at the death of her mother. He had taken her, a sad-eyed, fair-faced child of fourteen, and since then he had been all that a kind and loving father could be to an only daughter. She had grown to love him as if he were truly her own father, but of a sudden, in a single night, a change had come over him that repelled her from him and made her afraid in his presence.

What did it mean? The question was too deep for her to answer.

"Mr. Duke," said Royal, with forced calmness, "will you listen to me?"

"No, sir," was the prompt reply, "I will not. I do not care to hear anything you may have to say."

"Do you know that by such a course you are simply forcing us into secret meetings?"

"Hah! then by that I am to understand you will do as you choose about paying your attentions to my adopted child, regardless of my desires? That is enough! I see that I have been deceived by you in the past, but my eyes are open. From this moment you are nothing to Meta. I forbid her speaking or even looking at you. You shall learn you can not openly defy a man in my position when you aspire to the hand of his daughter. It is plain to me you are a fortune-hunter, and it is probably my wealth you have been scheming for."

"You should know better than that, sir," said Royal, his voice trembling with the intensity of his pent-up emotions. "You knew my father before you came to Damascus, and you knew he was a wealthy man. He aided you when you needed funds, and this is your gratitude. You know I am not a fortune-hunter, for my father is dead and I was his only heir. I can not understand why you should make such a ridiculous statement."

Horatio Duke's face crimsoned and he looked somewhat confused, but he quickly recovered his composure in a measure.

"Yes, I do know these things, but you know your father never lost a dollar by me."

"I know you did not pay the debt while my father lived. It is true you have fully settled with me, and, according to my father's directions, I did not charge you one cent of interest. To-day I have witnessed the manner in which you reciprocate such favors, and I could not have been more amazed had you struck me in the face."

"You have presumed too much on my friendship for your father, young man. You are not like him."

"And you are not like the Horatio Duke of the past. There has been a change. You do not seem to be the same man. Your face and voice, as well as your nature, have changed. To-day there is a different man in the clothes Horatio Duke wore yesterday. By your decision to enforce the cut-down in the mine you have made every working man in Damascus your enemy. You have turned against me for nothing at all, but the time may come when you will be glad to recognize me as a friend."

For a moment the magnate did not seem to have words for a reply at his command. Finally, he said:

"I hardly think such a thing possible, but I will permit you to dream of it as much as you please. Just now I bid you a very good-day.—Come, Meta."

Despite the presence of the man whom she had grown to fear, the beautiful girl gave Royal a look that told him there would be no change in her feelings toward him—a look that caused the blood to leap warm in his veins. Then she turned her horse and rode away at Horatio Duke's side.

Royal Norman sat and watched them depart, his face dark and gloomy. When they had quite disappeared, he muttered:

"So it has come to this! Well, this is not the end by any means. I will yet have that girl for my wife, or my name is not Royal Norman!"

"Pully vor you! I like dot kint uf grits!"

Perched upon a high point of rock a short distance away was the little Dutchman, Fritz Schrickler.

"Py cracious! I pets me two peers you dit nod know I vas around somevares, don'd it? I vas peen ub heer takin' in all dot bicknicks. Dot vas petter than dot leedle variety's shows v'at I vent to somedimes so long agoes. How you feels now mit der schmall uf your packs after peing valked all ofer py dot vellars v'at don'd lige you vent mit his girls? Von dimes I pets me zwi tollars you would lick uf him der stuffins oudt, put you did nod do him, und so I losses all dot moneys v'at I don'd haf in mein bockets. Don'd dot vas funny?"

"Have you been there all the time?" asked Royal.

"Nix. Der dime haf peen here a creat deal longer than I haf. V'at you dakes me vor? Berhaps you dinks I vas oltre than Meduselums? Vell, I guess nod! I saw dot mules come up around dis vay und so I stard out to look after him. I d'inks berhaps he vas runnin' away vrom dot vimmins some more. V'en I gatches him und gids his pack on he kickt ub his heels und I vent sailin' lige a paloos mit der skies. I vent ub so high dot I dit nod haf some drouble to study astronomies mitoudt a mikroskobes and I gits so near der sun dot I pelief I scorches uf me der viskers off. Ven I game down I striges der grount so hart dot I mage a dents in him, I pets you. Den I vorgits v'at vas der madder mit Hanner, und der next din v'at I knows I vas ub here und you vas down there mit der ol't mans und der girls. Py Shimminy Jewsharps! I vas going to ride dot mules if I gits kickt righd ub acainst der broad side uf der moon. Dot vas der kint uf a Dutchmans I vas!"

Then Fritz slid gracefully down from his exalted position and struck on the ground in a sitting posture.

"Vell, here I vas!" he laughed, his jolly face being the picture of good nature. "V'en I can not git down some other vay, I vas always able to vall down. Und now I vill broceed to bick meinseluf ub."

Getting upon his feet, he approached the horseman and held up his hand.

"How you vas, don'd id? You vas clat to see me, berhaps. I vas stuck mit your styles on, und v'en you vas pud ub vor offices, I pelief I gifes you mein votes. You pets you dot you gits dot girls v'en you vants her. She vas deat gone mit herseluf on your shapes, und der ol't mans vas goin' to git left. V'en you gits married together I vants to sthand ub vor der pest mans. V'at you dinks uf dot?"

"I am afraid you will have to wait a long time," said Royal, smiling despite himself.

"Now don'd you pelieve dot. I dinks that you gits her before you ogspects him. I dells you somedings. Der ol't mans vas going to git his dails shepped on before long. You see if dot vas nod so."

"What do you mean?"

Fritz winked in a knowing manner.

"Dit you efer hear uf Hannab?"

"Hannab—"

"Yaw. Dere vas somedings der madder mit her. Der town uf Damascuses vas goin' to git vanked der wrong side oudt before long, und der Dukes hat petter look oudt that he don'd dakes von tumbled mit himselves. I dell you dot Dukes vas valking on soft-shelt eggs apout now."

Royal looked puzzled. He could not quite understand the little Dutchman. Fritz comprehended this and laughed heartily.

"You don'd catch on mit der idears, I pelieve. Vell, you vill haf to ogsause me if I don'd ogsplains him now. Put I dells you somedings. I vas von very fly poys, und I dit nod come around this town uf Damascuses vor nottings. I haf

peesness here, I pelief, I guess so. V'en I gits retty vor to let dot cats uf der pags oudt der vas goin' to be some surbrise bartys, und don'd you vorgit him."

"You are too much for me," confessed the young man.

"Oh, I vas a britty deep ones," smiled Fritz, thrusting his thumbs into the arm-holes of his vest and strutting about a little. "I vas nod so much uf a vool as some beoples thought I vas v'en I vas von habies. Mein mutter hears v'at they says apout me then, und so she calt in der doctors und asks him if I vas a vool. He said I vas nod a vool, put I vas simby von idiots, vich mages mein mutter veel some reliefs."

"How are you going to get back to Damascus?"

"Oh I rites pack mit Shank's boss. I ogspects it vas nod very far, eh?"

"Less than a mile."

"Vell, I gids ub von abbytites vor mein tinners. I haf nod hat somedings to ead since morning, und I vas empty as a pase-drums. I pets you I greates some famines in dot hotels v'en I gids there. I vas von pad mans at der taples. Yaw, dot vasso."

After a few moments more of conversation they started toward Damascus, Fritz walking beside the horse and keeping up a running fire of odd talk all the time. The little Dutchman was an enigma to Royal, who began to believe it was true that Fritz was not as much of a fool as some people might imagine.

When they approached the town they were startled to hear hoarse shouts and the roar of many voices. Then they saw a mob of men surging around two persons on horseback. A second glance revealed the fact that these two persons were the Duke of Damascus and his daughter.

"By heavens!" exclaimed Royal. "The strikers have got Mr. Duke cornered and he is in great danger. In their anger they may lynch him!"

"Dot vas so," Fritz agreed.

"I will now show him I am not a friend to be despised!" cried the young man, and putting spurs to his horse, he thundered down the trail.

Fritz followed as fast as his short legs could run.

CHAPTER X.

VIOLET VANE LOOKS BEHIND THE VAIL.

BEFORE Royal Norman reached the excited mob of strikers, Horatio Duke and his adopted daughter succeeded in urging their horses through the crowded mass of men and breaking away. But the furious miners pursued them, shouting and cursing like a mob of maniacs. It was plain they had been drinking freely.

Savagely Royal spurred his horse forward till he was able to ride in between the pursuing strikers and the fleeing man and girl.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Are you men? There is a lady with the man you are pursuing!"

A furious roar came from the aroused strikers.

"Death to old Duke!"

"Lynch him!"

"Shoot him!"

"Down with the aristocrat!"

Royal turned a shade paler, but shouted again:

"If you are men, have some thought of the young lady! Hold on, for God's sake!"

He saw weapons gleaming in many a hand, and feared the liquor-maddened gang would open fire on the escaping mine-owner. If they did, the chances were more than even that Meta would be struck by some of the flying bullets. It only needed a single pistol-shot to call forth a general fusillade.

"Out of ther way!" shouted a big fellow in advance.

But young Norman was not in the least a coward. He reined his horse in sharply till the animal reared on its haunches in front of the mob, pawing the empty air with its front feet.

"Hold a moment, gentlemen!" he cried once more. "Do not be too hasty, now. Think of Meta, whom you have often called 'the Pride of Damascus.' By your rashness you are endangering her life. I call on every man in this crowd to help stay this mad rush. Another day is coming."

Of a sudden one of the leaders of the pursuit joined with the daring young man.

"Hold on, boys!" he cried, facing the men, and flinging up two brawny arms. "Put on ther brakes! Norman is right. We all know him, and he is a white man, if he is rich."

"You bet!" agreed another. "He lent me twenty when I was out of work, an' didn't have a bite in ther house to keep my wife and children

from starvin'. I'd 'a' been able to paid it next pay-day but for this cut-down and strike."

The miners halted promptly and gathered around Royal.

"Hooray fer Norman!" bellowed one.

The crowd gave a hoarse shout.

Royal bowed calmly, but within his bosom his heart was thumping heavily.

"I thank you, gentlemen," he said, as soon as he could command his voice. "I see I am not misunderstood, and I assure you you have my sympathy in this time of trouble. I hope and I firmly believe it will all end well if you are not too hasty in your acts. Mr. Duke and Mr. Darke will be forced to come to terms and do you justice. But if you commit some lawless act, you will simply injure yourselves."

"We can't live on wind while they are comin' to terms," growled a fellow well concealed in the midst of the crowd.

"Nor need you, if you are discreet, for it will not be long before you are all back at work in the mines. I hear some of you have threatened to wipe out the town. Nothing could be more foolish, for you would only destroy your own chance of employment. Go slow and sure."

"That's good advice, pards," commented one large man, who was not as intoxicated as many of his companions.

"Let's go rake a drink all round on it," shouted another.

"That is the unwise thing you can do," boldly asserted young Norman. "If you drink enough to become partially intoxicated, you are almost sure to commit some act for which you will be sorry in the future. At the same time you are drinking up the money you need to bridge over this crisis. Take my advice and let liquor alone."

"That's good advice," mumbled a tipsy fellow in the front rank. "Better let ther stuff erlone—hic—if you don't want ter hev big head ter-morrer. Jush foller my 'zample."

"We'd all be dead drunk before night."

This caused a faint laugh, and at this moment Fritz came puffing and blowing upon the scene.

"V'at you means by dose actions?" he squawked, swinging his clinched fists wildly in the air. "V'y you shase dot girls, I vants to ogplain? You scares uf her der senses oudt. If I catches you doin' dot some more I vill lick der crowdt or pu'st mein galluses! Dot vas der kint uf a hairbins this shickens vas, I pelieve! Yaw, I guess so."

"Oh, go soak your head!" cried a derisive voice.

Fritz fairly danced with rage.

"V'ere vas der cus-tomers v'at mages dot remarks?" he howled. "Shust show der sons uf a guns dot dared vag his shaw in dot kint uf a manner! Shust trot him oud here und see me knock uf him der packings oudt! Oh, Shimminy Jew-sharps! don'd I ache to baralyze somepodys mit a crack vrom one uf dose sledge-hammer vists' v'at I hef bicht on der end uf mein arms!"

"Get out, you little runt of a Dutchman, before you get hurt!"

"Dot vas der same vellers! Oh, v'ere he vas? I pets you zwi tollars he don'd dare show his mugs! If he dit I'd plack uf him der two eyes so quick as never vas. I vos der poy v'at knockt uf Shon Sullimans der under shaw off. Oh, gome oudt und see me von leedle v'ile!"

A big fellow pushed his way through the crowd.

"Let me get my fins on that Dutch cock," he said. "I will shake him out of his clothes in about three seconds."

"Vas you der man v'at makes dot talk?" asked Fritz.

"Bet yer life I am."

"Gread Scotts!"

The boasting Dutchman instantly turned and ran as if for his life, while he shouted over his shoulder:

"Ogscuse me! I haf some peesness v'at demands some attentions at vonce."

And he did not halt until he had dashed through the open door of the City Hotel and disappeared.

Thirty minutes later a man came out of the hotel and paused an instant on the steps. He was dressed in a plain suit of clothes and wore a wide-brimmed hat pulled well down over his eyes, which were dark and piercing. He was somewhat below medium height, but was compact and supple in build, every movement telling the experienced eye of an unexpected alertness and power possessed by the man.

It was Violet Vane, minus disguise of any kind.

For the space of nearly five minutes he stood

on the hotel steps glancing sharply in all directions from beneath the wide brim of the hat he wore. The mob of strikers had vanished and there were few people on the street.

"I see nothing of the spies who have dogged me all day," muttered Vane; "yet I feel sure they are still on the watch. They think they have penetrated my disguise, still they are in doubt. If I can keep them puzzled a short time longer I shall be able to play my last card and keep my vow to the dead."

As he stood there, Royal Norman came walking slowly along the street, his face wearing a moody expression.

"I wonder if he will recognize me?" muttered the man on the steps. "If he does, I shall think it possible the others have penetrated the character which I have attempted to personate. I will speak to him."

He walked slowly down the steps and arrived at the street just as Royal was passing.

"Excuse me, sir," said Vane, politely; "but do you know a person in town by the name of Frank Fenton?"

Royal cast a sharp look at the questioner, and replied:

"I do not."

Then he bowed his head and passed on in the same thoughtful attitude.

"He did not drop," smiled Vane; "and he is as sharp as the best of them. The trick is still good."

He watched Royal's retreating form a few seconds, and then turned in the other direction, murmuring:

"Now I must hasten to meet my darling girl—poor fatherless child! How she escaped from the clutches of her father's vile assassins is a mystery to me; but she is free, and to keep my pledge to the dead I have only to see that the murderers do not escape their just dues."

"But why is lone friendly with that ex-robber lieutenant, Fenton? That is a mystery to me. Once I believed she had played me false, but I finally found I had been cunningly deceived. I have no desire to be hasty in this case. I can well understand why she should choose to keep her face concealed, for she must stand in some fear of the dastards who have been her captors."

"But I will soon see her and learn the truth. She penetrated my disguise and sent me a message asking me to call at the cottage down by the big pine. She will be there to welcome me with open arms. I must hasten to her."

Swiftly he walked down the street, his step being light and springy and his blood running warm in his veins. In a short time he was knocking at a cottage door near the outskirts of the town.

After a few seconds the door swung softly open, and when he had entered, it closed behind him. The room was in semi-darkness, for the heavy curtains were drawn. But he saw a figure before him—the supple, graceful form of a female whose face was hidden by a veil. With a glad cry, he leaped forward and clasped her in his arms.

"My little darling—thank God!"

He brushed away the veil and kissed her fairly on the lips. Then he reeled back with an exclamation of horror.

The woman was not lone, but one he had known in the past as Ada, the Outlaw Queen!

CHAPTER XI.

A WOMAN'S LOVE AND A MAN'S SCORN.

VIOLET VANE threw up one arm in a guarding attitude and shrunk back as if he had touched an evil spirit, his face marked by an expression of repulsion, although the woman before him was a handsome one.

"You—you!" he gasped.

She did not speak, but with a movement of her left hand she turned up the flame of a lighted lamp and stood before him in the blaze of light, truly a queenly beauty.

"You!" he repeated, his repugnance revealed in his voice as well as his face.

He passed his hand across his lips as if to wipe away her touch. She saw the move and a bit of color faded from her face. But she loved the man with a love that might turn to the most savage hatred.

"Yes," she murmured softly, appealingly, her voice trembling a little. "It is I. You have not forgotten me?"

"Forgotten you! No! Such a thing is impossible!"

She caught her breath with a little sob that was a wonderful counterfeit if it was not genuine.

"I—I feared you had."

"And I wish to God I might!"

Her eyes were lifted till they met his dark orbs—her eyes of melting blue. For a single instant she kept them thus, then they fell, her hands were clasped, her shoulders drooped, her entire attitude was one of dejection and despair.

"I—had—hoped— But what right had I to hope?" pressing her white fingers fiercely together till the warm red blood showed through the clear thin skin. "You know how madly I loved you, yet—"

"Stop!" he commanded, harshly. "I did not come here to listen to such talk!"

"And I had no thought of making such talk. The words stole unbidden from my lips. When I am with you I forget my womanhood—I forget everything but my mad passion! Why was woman made to love? And so hopelessly—so hopelessly!"

Her fair face fell in her hands and her yellow hair suddenly dropped silently down about her shoulders in a mass of pure gold. Not many men could have resisted the temptation to clasp that perfect figure in his arms and speak soothing words into the shell-like ear that faintly showed amid the sunny strands; but Violet Vane had once felt the seductive influence of the beautiful enchantress's fascinations and his pulses were not quickened by a thrill.

"Where is lone Wilson?" he demanded, coldly.

She lifted her head a bit, but did not look up.

"Why do you ask me?"

"The note said I should find her here."

"And I wrote the note," confessed Ada.

"Impossible!" he ejaculated, in amazement.

"It is true."

"But the writing—"

"Was an excellent counterfeit of hers. I have not studied her handwriting for nothing."

"Then she is not here?"

"No."

He turned toward the door.

"Hold!" she cried, springing forward with a hand outstretched. "You must not go till you have listened to me—you must not! It will be suicide on your part, for I would warn you of a terrible danger that threatens you."

He paused and cast a look at her over his shoulder.

"I am not trying to deceive you," she earnestly declared. "If you have a care for yourself or the girl you love, listen to me!"

Vane turned and faced her, saying calmly:

"Go on and be brief. I have no time to fool away."

"Come back and sit down," entreated the siren. "I cannot talk while you are standing."

She made a motion toward an easy arm-chair, and after a moment of hesitation, he walked toward it.

"I shall stand no folly. If you have anything to say, say it lively."

She sunk into a chair facing him.

"I hardly know how to begin. I know your mission in Damascus. You made a vow beside the dead—"

"A vow I shall keep."

"Perhaps. But your enemies know of that vow, and they have sworn to slay you."

He flung out his hand with a contemptuous laugh.

"Two of the dastardly gang have paid the penalty of their crime; the others will follow. You will be the last, Captain Flash!"

The woman turned very white and trembled in every limb. But only for a moment. Her color came back and she laughed carelessly.

"So you would slay a woman?"

"No; I will bring her to justice."

"I am not responsible for Owen Wilson's death."

"You are! You led the Serpent Six."

"But I did not strike him. He fought like a tiger and one of the men was forced to give him the knife in self-defense."

"But for you those men would not have been there. You were at the bottom of it all. Your brain concocted the foul plot for kidnapping a poor girl from her sick father's side and you led the evil band that carried out your scheme. It was a blow at me."

"I loved you so!"

"You loved me! Was that a loving act? If so, I choose your hatred. It was a blow at my heart."

"But you do not understand. I could not remain idle and let you marry her. She never really and truly loved you—she does not know what love is. Had you married her, you would have obtained a fickle child who did not know her own—"

"That is enough!" he commanded, frigidly.

"She is too good and pure to be spoken of by such as you."

"Do you think so? Oh, blind, blind, blind! I would to God you could read her heart!"

"But you called me back to warn me."

"Yes."

"Of whom?"

"The survivors of the Serpent Six."

"Nonsense! You are one of them."

"But I do not thirst for your blood."

He smiled scornfully.

"You do not believe me," she cried, "but it is true. That is my reason for warning you. Since you came to Damascus you have slain two of the band. Of course the others were furious and it was necessary for me to join in with them. We have pledged ourselves to kill you, but I stand ready to aid you in any way possible."

"You would prove a traitor to your own dupes?"

"I would do anything for you—anything!"

He felt that she told the truth, and for a moment a feeling of compassion for the wayward woman stirred his heart; but he swiftly smothered the emotion, for was not she a degraded creature whose hands were stained with crime?

"You are playing cards against yourself, for I shall keep my vow to wipe out your dastardly band. To do so it is not necessary for me to administer justice myself. Every one of you are badly wanted in different parts for crimes you have committed, and at those places lynching would be your punishment. I ended the careers of two of the band to prevent them from committing murder. It was my duty; there was but one thing for me to do. The others are booked, but I hope to escape the unpleasant duty of cashing their checks."

"Are you nothing but a cold-blooded human hound?"

"My vow to the dead is sacred."

"And still I love you!"

"That kind of talk is becoming stale. It would be a great relief if you would give me less of it."

Her eyes flashed, her head was lifted, her nostrils dilated. She looked like a beautiful wild thing that had been angered, and Vane felt his blood stir despite himself.

"So you scorn my love?" she hissed. "Be-ware!"

"Yes," he replied, with a reckless, tantalizing smile, "I scorn such love."

She sprang to her feet, furious.

"You are the first man whom I have not been able to bring to my feet!" she cried, her hands clinched and her head thrown back, the golden hair falling to her waist. "I will yet bring you there—or kill you!"

She stamped smartly on the floor with one small foot. There was a sudden soft clanking click of steel and a dozen metal bands instantly closed over Violet Vane's limbs and around his body, locking him to the chair in which he sat.

He was trapped!

CHAPTER XII.

THE MERCY OF A TIGRESS.

FOR a second time Violet Vane had fallen into the power of the Outlaw Queen. Once before in the past had she ensnared him, and although he had been constantly on his guard, he had again fallen a victim to her wiles.

With a cry of rage, he attempted to tear himself from the chair, but the relentless clamps of steel held him fast, and the woman laughed in his face.

"It is useless," she declared. "If you had the strength of a Samson you could scarcely free yourself, so you may as well give over the effort."

He fell back glaring at her.

"That is right," she smiled. "I am pleased to see something besides a look of contempt on your face. You are beginning to realize I am not to be scorned."

"I am beginning to realize you have the trickery of a treacherous cat!"

"Do you give me credit for brains?"

"Yes, brains for concocting murderous plots. You are a child of Satan!"

She laughed again.

"So your blood is thoroughly stirred? Well, I am pleased. You will understand in time that I am not a common woman. Since you sat down on that chair I have been watching you as a cat watches a mouse, and yet you flung your scorn in my face. I was waiting for you to assume the proper position for the clamps to get in their work, and after a time you unconsciously fell into it. Then I stamped upon the floor here, where, beneath the matting, there is an ingenious arrangement connected with the springs which works the clamps. In an instant

the springs were released and you were in my power."

"Did you plan this infernal machine yourself?"

"I did, but a master workman built it for me."

"It is a worthy instrument of such a woman."

"Many thanks."

"Now you have me here, what do you intend to do with me?"

"Well, that depends. I may kill you, although I hardly wish to do such a thing."

"I will guarantee it is not your conscience that makes you hesitate."

"It is plain you think me much worse than I am. I swear to you, fate drove me to become the woman you know. I am not half as bad as you believe me. Many a woman who is a good church-member and a professed Christian is worse at heart than I. I regret my past life and hope to lead a different future. But although I have associated with outlaws, I have never tarnished my womanhood beyond the stain it received from its surroundings. I swear it! From the first false step I have not been able to recover. I became the wife of a criminal who was under ban of the law. He was forced to flee to the mountains where he gathered a band of reckless men around him and I found myself the wife of an outlaw chief. Since then I have never been able to shake myself clear of the life he led me into."

"I scarcely believe you have tried."

"That is where you do me an injustice, for I have tried. And I have not given over trying. I believe there is still hope."

A scornful smile curled the helpless man's lips.

"That kind of talk sounds well; but what hope can there be for a murderess?"

A cry came from her lips as if wrung forth by his cruel words.

"There is no blood on my hands!" she exclaimed, holding the small and shapely members up before his eyes. "You cannot lay Owen Wilson's death at my door!"

"Why not?"

"I gave strict orders that there should be no bloodshed."

"You confess you led the kidnappers?"

"Yes."

"One of them killed Mr. Wilson, and for the man's death you are equally responsible with the wretch who struck him down. But for you, he might be living to-day."

"You look at it wrong, wrongly! If you reason thus, then you are to blame, for it was my love for you that led me to the act."

"A logical reasoning, indeed! The reasoning of a woman whose mind is warped and distorted by crime! Such a creature talks of love—love! Can it be you know the true meaning of the word?"

She leaped forward, her eyes glowing like living coals, her hand tearing a dagger from her bosom. There was something in the supple movement of her lithe body that reminded him of the spring of an angry tigress. She bent over him with the glistening dagger held aloft by one perfectly molded arm, seeming on the very verge of driving it straight into his heart.

"Say your prayers!" she hissed, her milk-white teeth gleaming out between her drawn and parted lips, her hot breath scorching his cheek. "The limit has been reached! You have aroused me at last, and you shall die!"

Then the man displayed his wonderful nerve. He felt she meant to kill him, but he knew there was no chance of escaping from the fatal clasp of the death-chair, so he did not make a struggle. He did not cry out, his eyes met hers, he smiled! Had he been conversing with a very dear friend upon the most agreeable topic in the world he could not have smiled more pleasantly.

"Strike," he said, not a tremor in his manly voice. "It will be a little thing—for you. Only another daub of blood upon your hands. I ask no mercy—strike!"

Had he quailed—had he cried out or shown the least symptom of cowardice, the furious woman would have completed her work. But there was something about his undaunted demeanor, something about the placidness of his voice and the dauntless glance of his dark eyes that stayed the fatal stroke. The woman's face became as white as that of a corpse, she gasped for breath and swayed as if about to fall; the dagger fell from her hands, striking the floor with a musical sound.

"I cannot—I cannot!" she panted. "Even though you have sworn to wreck my life, I love you so I cannot do this deed!"

She staggered back and fell into a chair, burying her face in her hands. She did not see the

revulsion that came over the helpless man. He had expected death, and when she did not strike it seemed every drop of blood in his body rushed in a torrent to his heart. For a moment his face turned as white as had the woman's and he trembled in every limb. But, with a mighty effort, he shook off his agitation and gained control of his nerves, becoming cool and unshaken once more.

For several minutes Queen Ada remained where she had sunk in the chair. Finally, she looked up, and in her eyes he saw not the light of anger but a glow of admiration.

"You are so brave—so brave!" she murmured. "Not many men could have looked death in the face like that and remained unshaken. I do not wonder I love you."

"And have you quite given over your murderous intentions?" he calmly asked.

"Yes. If I knew I was signing my death-warrant by my folly, I could not force myself to end your life. I know when I turn you free you will again resume the death-hunt; but what care I for life?" It holds nothing for me now."

Was she an admirable actress, or was her emotion genuine? He would have given much to know.

"But I have one satisfaction," she continued. "You will never marry Ione Wilson. As God is my judge, I am telling you the truth when I say she is false to you. I know it."

"That game is too thin," he sneered. "You attempted to play it once before, and—fool that I was—I was deceived for a time. It will not work this time."

"I acknowledge I tried to deceive you in the past, but this time I am telling you what is true. It makes little difference whether you believe me or not, you will learn the facts for yourself soon. Then perhaps you will not scorn my love."

"Do not delude yourself in such a manner. If Ione were in truth false, you could be nothing to me. Were you a pure woman, I could not respect you after you had so boldly declared your affection for me. By doing so you cast aside the natural reserve and modesty which makes a woman attractive and assumed the position of a man."

"But what is a woman to do?" she cried, desperately. "If I had not told you of my love, you would never have dreamed of it."

"But how much better off are you for telling me? Would it not have been much better if you had said nothing about it?"

"Perhaps so," Ada confessed. "Still we cannot tell what the future may bring forth. Frank Fenton was the lieutenant of my old band, and while Ione Wilson was a captive in my hands he fell in love with her. She was enamored by him at the time, but she had resolved to remain true to you, and when she was rescued she tried to forget him. A second time she became a captive in my hands and Fenton followed us, resolved to rescue her. Before the opportunity came, she escaped through the carelessness of the band, and he must have found her while she was wandering alone amid the mountains. He immediately brought her to Damascus, where she is known as the Veiled Mystery. She is very intimate with Fenton, and has told him she would marry him when her father's death was avenged."

"A very pretty lie!"

"If you think so, go to her and demand to know the truth. In that manner you can settle it very swiftly."

"I am scarcely able to walk so far at present," laughed the nervy man. "I happen to have a binding engagement right here."

"You shall be released."

She arose and advanced to the chair.

"If I wished I could keep you a captive, and my men would see that you were disposed of quietly. It would not be necessary for me to do the deed. But I am going to set you free. I have no thirst for your life; but I will warn you that you need expect no mercy at the hands of the comrades of those men you destroyed. They have sworn to wipe you out. You are free."

She touched a spring and the clamps fell from him, sliding silently into the hidden grooves in the chair.

He leisurely arose, stretching his limbs and smiling his thanks.

"I am greatly relieved by your kindness. If you please, I will bid you good-day."

"You are free to depart."

Her hand sought the lamp and the light sunk. Then she made another move and the door swung open.

He picked up his hat and walked quietly toward the open door, without uttering another word. She did not speak, but he heard a low

rustle behind him. As he passed out he glanced back, the faint rosy light from the lamp revealing a picture he never forgot.

Once more the strange, wayward woman had fallen into a chair, and with her face crushed into her hands, her yellow hair falling all about her shoulders, her attitude was one of abject despair.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISS MIGGLES AND MOLE.

BRADFORD DARKE, owner of the Bengal Tiger Mine, had his spies among the strikers, and the movements and threats of the angry men were reported to him. Darke was not a brave man, although he was naturally arrogant and overbearing toward those whom he considered his inferiors, and some of the threats made by the strikers terrified him. During the afternoon of the second day of the strike he sought an interview with Horatio Duke, but the magnate absolutely declined to see him. At this indignity from his rival Darke became greatly angered, and before an hour had passed it was reported the owner of the Bengal Tiger had decided to continue payment at the old scale. Later the report was confirmed by a notice signed by Darke himself.

Great was the delight of the strikers when they found they had won the victory in one quarter almost without a struggle.

"Duke will have to give in now!" they shouted.

A sort of impromptu meeting was held in the Sweet Buttercup Saloon. Speeches were made by some of the leaders among the strikers, and enthusiasm ran high. A committee of five was appointed to wait on Horatio Duke, and discover if a settlement could not be made without further delay.

The committee was escorted down the street toward Duke's residence by the entire crowd of laborers, not a few of whom were considerably the worse for the liquor they had absorbed.

But they met a repulsion when they reached the magnate's house, for the door was not opened at their summon. Despite their heavy knocking, no sign of life appeared about the place. The curtains were closely drawn, and the house looked deserted.

"Thump harder!" yelled one of the crowd.

The committee followed the advice, but still no one appeared. Angry mutterings ran over the mob of strikers.

"He's thar," growled one red-whiskered fellow; "but he don't propose ter pay any 'tention ter us."

"Counts us below his notice," observed a second miner.

"It's er derved insult!"

"Right you are, pard."

"We'll show him if we are wuth notice."

"Let's haul down his shanty."

"Stones, pards, stones!"

Before the soberer men of the crowd could prevent, the liquor-maddened miners seized such missiles as their hands could find and began pelting the mine-owner's house. There was a jingling crash of glass as one after another the windows were shattered, and the excited men whooped forth their delight at the damage they were doing.

"Down with 'ristocrats!"

The cry swelled to an appalling roar, and there was great danger that the house would be destroyed.

Suddenly Bayard Swift appeared on the scene, mounted on a white horse.

"Hold on, men!" he shouted—"hold on, for God's sake and for your own sakes! Are you mad? It is possible that Mr. Duke is not home. You are injuring your own cause by such reckless acts."

He had a splendid manly voice and every man understood. There was an instant lull in the tumult.

"The battle is already yours, if you do not foolishly destroy your own victory," continued Bayard. "Darke has given in; you know that. Go a little slow. The best thing you can do now is to keep quiet. Every man who is in favor of order and peace follow me."

He turned up the street and the entire party followed. In the front of the City Hotel he halted and made a brief speech, which was hailed with some enthusiasm.

J. Milton Mole had joined the crowd, and the poet seemed greatly interested in the young superintendent's talk. Mole tried to force his way through the throng and reach Swift, but before he could succeed the superintendent had finished his remarks and ridden away.

"Even though my pulses burn, disappointment waits at every turn," murmured the poet

sadly. "Of all life's joys I am bereft; I am the man who's always left. I am in a dejected frame of mind, for there does not seem to be any business in this town. Two deaths since I arrived, but friends of the deceased do not appear to care about their obituaries. And that does cause my sober mood, for the lack of biz is lack of food. I wonder where I could find my friend Fritz. Perchance he could lend me a quarter."

But no one seemed to have an idea where the little Dutchman could be found.

"I have a fear, I do declare, that he has vanished into air," sighed Mole. "I have a fear that I am doomed, doomed! I have a fear that—But never mind. I will not burden the atmosphere with my fears. If the worst comes, I will meet my fate like a man.—Hal! Unless I am in truth a fool, here comes the maid who owns the mule."

Miss Mehitable Miggles was indeed approaching. She espied the poet and hastened toward him.

"It's not often I ask anything of a man," she sniffed, smoothing out the wrinkles in her dress with her hands; "but I am not precluded to stoop to that degradation. I am nothing but a poor friendless female woman, and I hope you will have some consideration for my commotions."

Mole appeared on the alert as if ready to retreat at the first sign of danger, but he plucked up courage to reply:

"Say on, fair maid; be not afraid."

"You are a really and truly poet, aren't you?" smiled the spinster, encouragingly. "I hope you did not take offense at anything I said about poets the first time we met. At that time my nervous system was in a terrible high-strung position, and I scarcely heeded my utterations. I reassure you, sir, if there is *anything* manual that I do admire it is a poet."

Mole lifted his hat and bowed very low, with his hand upon his heart.

"It gives me unbounded pleasure to hear you say that," he declared. "I have always held the fairer sex in the highest esteem, and since meeting you they have risen still higher in my regard. They are the fairest, frailest and most angelic creatures that breathe this common air of earth," continued the poet, striking a dramatic attitude as he waxed eloquent. "Oh woman, woman! what could we do without thee? But for thy divine presence we would become degenerated and civilization would cease to be civilized. Yea, verily! But for thy soft and tender care we'd find no butter in the hair. Ahem! Excuse me! That was not just what I intended to say, but let it pass."

Miss Miggles giggled and looked coquettish.

"Aren't you funny! Why, I never heard a man talk like that before! But I sought your presence to ask you if you have seen anything of my dear Moses."

"Moses?"

"My mule."

"Ah-ha!"

"My charming queen I have not seen
The beast of which you speak;
I am afraid I cannot aid
To find the mule you seek."

I assure you I am very sorry. If I knew where the animal is I would gladly give you such information as you desire. But I will say there is a certain Dutchman who has developed a great admiration for your beast of burden. I hope he has not appropriated it, although it might give me a job in the obituary line if he were so reckless."

"I have seen the outdacious scamp," declared Miss Mehitable. "He had the boldness to confound me with the declaration that my dear Moses belonged to him. I just gave him a piece of my mind, and if he had not cleared quick, I would have scratched him good! That's the kind of a maiden I am!"

Mole retreated a step in alarm as she became a trifle excited at the remembrance of the Dutchman's audacity; but Miss Miggles smiled reassuringly on him.

"Oh, you needn't be alarmed!" she hastened to say. "I am not going to touch you."

"Thanks, many thanks!" bowed the little poet. "I am of a very mild disposition, and always avoid excitement of any kind."

"You would make an excellent husband," faltered the modest spinster.

"Ah! Do you really think so?"

"I do indeed, for you would not propose your wife's wishes. In your family there would be peace and harmony. Oh, what a blissful picture arises before my optical eyesight!"

Mr. Mole looked somewhat abashed. He hemmed in an embarrassed manner and kept

his eyes on the ground, without venturing any further remark at that juncture.

"Have you never thought of the great actuation of putting off single blessedness for double bliss?" asked the little spinster, edging a bit closer to the poet.

"Well—ahem!—I do not know as I have."

"It is a vitating problem."

Mole was silent.

"There are hearts which beat in unison, yet are forced to beat apart," continued Miss Miggles.

She cautiously edged still closer, and Mole seemed on the point of bolting.

"All my weary resistance have I preambled up and down this wilderness of woe searching, searching for my companion heart. I have met with disappointments and derivations of soul. I have come to the consideration that everything of the manual gender is coarse and unfit for a tender flower like me. Perhaps I am in error. Could you give me the insurance that I am?"

"I—I—I don't know," stammered the unfortunate rhymester.

"It would be so soothing and comforting if you could! You are a poet, and you have a better misunderstanding of these things than common people possess."

"I am afraid you give me too much credit."

"Oh, no! I am sure I do not. You are really an extinguished person, and I have a admirality for extinguished people. I feel a yearning toward you. You would make an agreeing companion for—"

But J. Milton Mole waited to hear no more. With an exclamation of terror, he fled precipitately.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SPINSTER'S LITTLE GAME—AT SUNSET.

MISS MIGGLES appeared amazed.

"Landy sakes!" she ejaculated.

As Mole dashed into the City Hotel he cast a hasty look over his shoulder with the evident object of seeing if he was pursued.

"Well, now, I'd jest like to have somebody susplain what hit him," said the spinster. "It's strange he should take to his heels like that just when I was on the point of giving him an important hint. But it's just like a man! There's never no suspending on what they'll do next."

A shade of sadness settled on her face, and she sighed plaintively:

"It's plain I am doomed to travel this mundane atmosphere alone. Men are so treacherous! They are worse'n eels to catch. Ah, well! I'll try to be consigned to fate."

A short time later she was asking to be directed to the residence of Horatio Duke.

"I used to know Mr. Duke, if I am not succeedingly mistaken," she explained. "I am going to call on him and find out. Anyway, I am going to give him a slice of my opinion about this cut-down business. It is scandalous for him to suppress the poor laborers in such a manner."

Having learned where Mr. Duke lived, Miss Miggles marched upon the stronghold. She had little trouble in finding the place, for the strikers had left their marks upon it, but it was with no little difficulty she aroused a sign of life. Plainly, Mr. Duke's man-servant peered cautiously forth to see if the rioters had returned and then reported to his master that a solitary woman stood at the door.

"Well," snapped Miss Mehitable, as the door was discreetly opened and the Irishman placed his form as a blockade in the aperture, "I have had a time carousing you, hain't I? Are you deaf?"

"Not ser much but thit Oi kin hear a stave injoin whistle ez close ez this, mum," was Mike's reply.

"Oh, ye kin! I had begun to think a thunderbolt would not start ye. I've nigh pounded the skin all off my knuckles. If I was in your place I'd get a bearing horn."

"An' if Oi wuz in yure place, mum, Oi'd borry a foile an' foile the sharrup aige av me voice."

"None of your insolence, sir!"

"Yez kin take it or I've it, mum."

"Don't 'mum' me, you parody on humanity! If you do, you may wish you'd kept mum!" and the spinster shook a fist under the Irishman's nose.

"An' doon't yez be afther doin' av the loikes av thit ag'in!" cried Mike, seizing his nasal organ with a thumb and fore-finger. "Oi bad rayther take chloroform!"

"Do you mean to consult me?" squawked the now thoroughly aroused Miss Mehitable. "I will have you interested for your consolation!"

"Thit w'u'd be a very intheristing pace av business."

"You're a rapsallion!"

"Thanks for the compliment. The same to you."

"I want to see Mr. Duke."

"Oh, am I afraid this want will be the master of you?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Misther Duke is not 't' be sane."

"Well, he will have to see me."

"Sure, an' yez doon't m'ane it!"

"Don't I! Well, you'll find out I do! I don't permit no foreign vandal to incumber my freedom, you'll discover that!"

She flew at the servant with a suddenness that quite took him by surprise, and before he fairly comprehended her intentions, he was seized in her sinewy hands and shaken till his teeth rattled.

"Consult a lone female woman, will ye!" she vociferated, with a shrillness that penetrated through the entire house. "I'll instigate better manners into your ossified pate, I will! I'll shake some of the misagreeableness out of ye! How do ye like this? Fun, hain't it? I reckon ye won't be mumming so much after this little episode. Perhaps you'll know me next time. Oh-o-o-o! hain't this a joke! I'll declare I'm the most agreeable little damsel you have seen in a long time. There, I guess that will do. If you'll wait till I have my little interval with your master I'll come back and finish the job."

As she swept serenely into the house, Mike leaned limply against the partition, gasping for breath and gazing at her in wonder.

"Begorra!" he gurgled, as the vigorous little spinster disappeared behind a door. "O! hiv a falin' thit O! hiv bin rin over by a cyclone. Or perhaps it's struck by lightning! O! was, O! dunno. Did O! hear sam wun sp'ake about fun? Be me saoul, it was too funny! She thought O!d know the loikes av her nix toime. Faith, she was roight! She made some remark about a joke, but me attintion was so occupied O! did not see the point av it. O! w'u'd loike t' hoire a marn t' kick me!"

Mike was thoroughly disgusted with himself.

Miss Miggles had little difficulty in finding her way to Horatio Duke's private office.

"Excuse me," she said, as she opened the door at a walked undauntedly into the apartment. "Do I behold Mr. Dukie?"

The mine-owner had overheard the spinster's shrill voice as she stood at the door, and he was in anything but an agreeable frame of mind.

"I am Mr. Duke," he replied, with dignity.

Miss Miggles bobbed a courtesy.

"I'm reel delighted to make your ultimate acquaintance," she smiled. "It is not often I am pleased by the first reappearance of a man, but you have such a benevolent and dispossessing cast of countenance that you make me feel as if I had known you far back in my past resistance when I was a thoughtless and innocent maiden. In the surging throngs of unappeased humanity, we often encounter faces that call up floods of sweet thoughts and tender memories. It is like the refrain of some old song for long years forgotten, and finally heard in a distant land. It ruffles up the innermost recesses of the soul like a breaking-up plow in an old pasture. It is very disaffecting."

Duke gazed at the little woman in amazement.

"What can I do for you, madam?" he finally asked.

"Now, that's jest like a man," simpered the spinster. "Why, you don't even give me time to catch my breathe? And I am quite stewed up after my interval with your charming Irish doorkeeper. I will have to be seated till this nervous fluctuation is banished. This is a real pleasant compartment, Mr. Dukie."

Duke's face became still more forbidding as she calmly appropriated a chair.

"I have no time to waste," he declared.

"Landy sakes, nor I! My time is fully pre-occupied. It is really distressing to premeditate how short time is from the nursery to the shining shore."

"Will you please make your business known?"

"I entreat you to have some consideration for my commotion!"

"Madam, business is business with me."

Miss Miggles looked distressed.

"I did hope to recover one man who was not like all the rest of the regenerated critters," she murmured, slowly rising. "But misappointment awaits me at every turn. However, I have one thing to perform you: I am not madam, but miss. My full name is Miss Miggles Annable Miggles."

She felt round hastily for the pocket in her crumpled dress.

"When my idols are so crudely shattered I

am supremely affected," she continued, seeming on the point of bursting into tears.

"Oh, Mr. Dukie! you can never know how your sweet features touch my heart and call up sweet memories of the past! There was one who looked so much like you, but he was false, false, false! He won the reflections of my tender heart, and then was reunited with another. Excuse these tears. I feel like declining my head on some broad breast and sobbing out my commotion."

Out came her handkerchief and she staggered toward the startled mine-owner.

"Be careful! be careful!" cried Duke, in alarm.

But the following moment she had clasped her arms around him in a hysterical manner. Then, by a singular mischance, the handkerchief which she held found its way to his mouth and nose. He was a strong man, but the little woman overpowered him in a brief space of time, and then he succumbed to a stupefying odor emanating from the handkerchief. His strength deserted him, and he sunk helpless and unconscious into the arms of his singular visitor, who lowered him gently to the floor.

As she surveyed the man whom she had so successfully tricked, a triumphant smile passed over the strange woman's face, and she muttered:

"Your bold game has ended, Jim Derril, and you have lost."

Sunset.

The Veiled Lady of Damascus wandered alone along the winding mountain trail.

The shadows began to gather beneath the somber pines, amid which the rising breeze made mysterious whisperings.

The lone wanderer appeared nervous and anxiously peered back from time to time along the trail. She finally seated herself on a boulder, murmuring:

"I will wait for him here. He will not fail to come. It is of the utmost importance. I must go from Damascus—I must! I cannot meet Philip. Poor Phil! I have treated him wretchedly I know, and he is one of the noblest fellows in the world. I am sorry we ever met. I was foolish to imagine myself in love with him when I only admired him. Frank Fenton is my ideal, and he is the only man I ever really and truly loved. How singularly we met! I was a captive amid outlaws; he was an outlaw lieutenant. I was attracted by him at once, he was such a handsome, dashing fellow, but I tried to keep from falling in love with him. I thought it would not be right, but who can govern their heart! What a strange thing is a woman's heart!"

A little sigh escaped from beneath the veil, and then, suddenly lifted her hands, she threw back the covering, exclaiming:

"It stifles me! Once I am away from this wretched town I will never wear a veil again even to protect me complexion!"

The face revealed in the dusky light was a pretty one, but in the delicately curving lines there was no trace of firmness of character or fixedness of purpose.

"Poor papa!" she continued, sadly. "He came to this wild Western land to find a home, but he found a grave instead. Frank says Philip swore to avenge father's death and has destroyed two of the wicked assassins. If that is true, he will never stop till he has kept his vow. He is relentless when he fixes his mind upon a purpose, and I fear the consequence when he learns I love another. There is sure to be trouble, and I am afraid bloodshed. It is terrible to think of!"

She shuddered as she contemplated what her own fickleness and folly might bring about; but the false step had been taken and it was too late for repentance. She could only go ahead, regardless of the future.

As the moments passed the lonely girl became still more nervous.

"Where can Frank be?" she muttered, gazing anxiously back over the trail. "He never fails to keep an appointment. It is growing dusky, and I am afraid of the shadows to-night. If he does not appear soon, I will have to start back, for I will not be out alone after dark."

But it was not long before a manly figure appeared walking swiftly toward her.

It was the young mine superintendent known in Damascus as Bayard Swift.

She greeted him with a cry of delight and ran to meet him with her hands outstretched.

CHAPTER XV.

CONFRONTED—THE DUEL.

He caught her in his strong arms and kissed her.

"Oh, Frank!" she murmured, as she clung to him, "I was afraid you were not coming."

"You know I never fail, little one."

"I know it, but I got awfully nervous. The sun has gone down and the shadows are gathering under the trees. It was lonely."

"But now—"

"But now I do not fear the blackest darkness. I am with you."

He was thrilled by her words.

"Such love and trust as yours is more than I deserve!" he exclaimed.

"No, no, no!" she cried. "You are worthy of the love of the best woman God ever made!"

"And you are that woman!" declared the infatuated man, kissing her red lips again and again. "I care nothing for all the rest of the world so long as you are mine—wholly mine!"

Clinging to him, she looked up into his eyes, as she whispered, passionately:

"So long as God gives me existence I am wholly yours, my prince!"

What man could ask for more?

The wind whispered softly amid the pines as if the somber trees were telling each other of the lovers who had met there beneath their branches.

The young man broke the silence.

"Why were you so anxious for me to come? You said you must see me and asked me to take every precaution against being followed."

"Yes. Since last night you have been watched."

"By whom?"

"One whom I dare not meet."

"Violet Vane?"

"Yes."

"Well, I do not fear him. I have done nothing dishonorable."

"That is the way you look at it. He may see it in a different light."

"Then he can simply ask satisfaction, and I will meet him like a man."

"That is what I wish to prevent."

"I am afraid you cannot prevent it."

"I fear so myself. I can see but one thing for us to do."

"That is—?"

"Leave Damascus at once."

"And give up our mission here?"

"You say Philip has sworn to avenge father's death."

"He has, but will it be right for us to leave the work entirely to him?"

She was silent several seconds.

"Oh," she finally cried, "what a situation I am in! If we remain, there is sure to be trouble between you and Philip. Our delay in Damascus may be simply suicidal."

"And my flight would be cowardly. If you do not wish to meet him, I will see you safely in some place where he will not be able to find you."

"That I will never consent to, you may be sure. If you stay, I shall do likewise. But we might go away and be married at once."

He started back in amazement.

"Have you forgotten your declaration that you would not be married till your father was avenged?" he asked.

Her head drooped.

"I fear I did forget it for a moment," she confessed.

"You know I would be delighted to make you my wife at once, little one," he said, passing his arm around her waist once more and drawing her to him. "If we were married I would have a claim on you that nothing but death could break. I could protect you then much better than I can now. You have put the barrier between us; I would be only too glad to sweep it away."

"But it cannot be long. You say you are almost certain of the men who murdered my father."

"I am, but I am not an assassin. I must prove that act against them or prove something else that will give justice a chance to take them in hand. I know enough to hang them twice over, but my word alone would not convict them. I am waiting for them to make some move which I can use against them. They are sure to do so in time, for they are villains of the first type."

"Oh, this waiting, this waiting!"

"I know it is trying, but I have promised you I would bring them to justice. I will keep my word, if Violet Vane does not destroy them."

"Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile the best thing we can do is get married. When you are my wife I can face Philip Vane Howard and defy him to take you from me."

"Oh, he will not try to do that! When he

finds I love another he will not think of me save as a miserable girl who has betrayed his affection. He would not take me back if I went to him and asked it on my knees."

"You are right!"

A dark figure stepped out from the deeper shadows beneath the pines and confronted them. It was Violet Vane!

With a choking cry, Ione sprung from the young mine superintendent's side and stood like a marble statue, staring in terror and appeal at her forsaken lover.

The ex-robber lieutenant uttered not a word, but confronted Vane without a tremor or the least show of fear.

For several seconds the three stood there silently in the gathering gloom of the on-coming night.

Vane was the first to speak.

"I do not ask an explanation of this little scene," he said, in tones that were hard as steel and cold as ice. "I understand it well enough."

The fair girl started forward a step with her hands outstretched in appeal, but he checked her words with a calm and deliberate gesture.

"Stop!" came firmly from his lips. "I have no desire to hear anything you may have to say. You cannot change the situation by words. Words will not justify your conduct. I do not blame you for loving another if you have found one more suited to your taste, but I do blame you for failing to act honorably with me. You should have come to me and told me the truth. I am not the man to want an unwilling wife; I am not the man to keep a woman bound to me when she loves another. I would give her up even if tore the heart from my bosom! You are a woman; to you I have no more to say."

"But I beg—"

She said no more, for he turned coldly from her as if she had ceased to exist. He faced the man who had stolen her love from him, and like red-hot darts the words leaped from his lips.

"You are the one whom I shall call to an account!" he thundered, striding forward three steps and standing within arm's-reach of the unflinching superintendent. "You have won her love!—you have robbed me of her!—but she shall never be yours till you have faced me like a man! If you have not the courage to face me, then I will kill you like a dog! I will give you sufficient provocation so you will have no loophole of escape."

Then, with his open hand, he struck Bayard Swift in the face.

The following instant, as Violet Vane leaped back a step, the hands of both men dropped on convenient weapons; but, with a wild cry of horror, Ione flung herself between them, begging them not to murder each other before her eyes.

"This affair can only be settled in blood," said Bayard, his voice quivering a bit; "but this is not the time or place. You shall hear from me soon, sir."

Violet Vane bowed with formal politeness, as he replied:

"You will find me ready and waiting at any time. The sooner it is over the better."

Four men stood in a moon-lighted glade within a few miles of Damascus.

Two of them were Violet Vane and Bayard Swift, who had met there to settle the trouble between them. The others were their seconds, Royal Norman and the little Dutchman, Frisky Fritz. Royal represented the superintendent of the Royal Duke and Fritz looked after Vane's interest.

"I really hate to see this affair go on," declared Royal. "Is there no other way it can be settled?"

Vane remained silent, but Fritz promptly replied:

"Nix. Ve vas nod der poys v'at come avay oudt here vor de fun of him. Id vas peesness mit us, you pet my poots."

Royal bowed, although the bright moonlight showed a look of regret on his face.

"Pistols are to be the weapons?"

"Yaw."

"Have you regular dueling weapons?"

"Vell, ve haf der kint v'at vas in sheneral uses in dis part of der countrys, der sigs-shooter. Dot vas coot enough vor our styles."

"Who will pace the distance?"

"I dinks perhaps you hat petter attend to dot, vor mein legs vas so short that they would pe getting der muzzles of their bistols scarred against each other."

The distance was paced and the two duelists took their places facing each other, six-shooters grasped in their right hands. Vane was calm as an iceberg, nor did the superintendent ex-

hibit any nervousness. Both men looked pale in the white moonlight.

Royal Norman was to give the signal, and he exhibited more emotion than any of the others. The little Dutchman seemed as undisturbed as if he were attending a wedding.

"At the word you are to fire," Royal called. "Ready!"

Swift turned his right side toward his foe and lifted his cocked weapon. Vane stood squarely facing the superintendent, his weapon only half lifted.

"One, two, three—fire!"

Just as Bayard Swift pressed the trigger, Vane threw up his hand and discharged his revolver with the muzzle turned directly toward the sky. The two reports sounded almost as one.

For an instant the two men stood as if neither had been touched, then Violet Vane fell heavily forward on his face.

Fritz quickly turned the fallen man over, showing the first signs of emotion as his eyes rested on a tell-tale blood-spot in the very center of Vane's forehead.

"Mein Gott!" he cried, in horror. "He vas shot plump drough der prain pans! He vas deater as olt Atam."

CHAPTER XVI.

BAFFLED KIDNAPPERS.

ALONE Ione Wilson paced up and down the length of a small cabin room, her face pale as death, her eyes blazing with a light little short of madness. Every few moments she would pause in a listening attitude for a short time and then resume her walk, wringing her hands wildly.

"Merciful Heaven!" she sobbed, although her eyes were tearless. "Why was this sent upon me? Can it be my act deserved such punishment? This is a thousand times worse than death!"

She struck her breast with her clinched hand as if she were driving a dagger to her heart.

"Yes, worse than death!" she repeated. "I did not mean to do anything so very wrong, God knows! Was I to blame for loving Frank the most? I could not choke down the love that grew in my heart, although Heaven knows I tried to do so. I tried to be true—I tried, I tried!"

"And now they have gone to fight a duel—gone I know not where! Did I know, I would do my best to prevent it—I would fly to the spot! Yes, I would throw myself between them if their bullets pierced my body! That might be a just and merciful fate for me. Hark!"

She heard a soft step at the door and her heart was frozen with terror, for through her brain flashed the thought that she had forgotten to fasten it. She would have darted forward and made it secure, but her fear overcame her till it was too late.

Slowly the door swung open, moving noiselessly. A horrible thought almost stifled her. One of the duelists had been slain and his spirit was coming back to haunt her! She would have cried aloud, but was powerless to do so.

A figure in a black cloak and hood glided into the room—a female figure. The hood was thrown back, and Ione stood face to face with Queen Ada! For several moments the two stared silently at each other, then the leader of the Serpent Six spoke, scornfully:

"Good-evening, pretty one! You do not seem pleased to see me?"

"What do you want here?" Ione demanded, when she could command her voice.

The intruder laughed, cuttingly.

"Want?—why I want to see you, of course. I want to look upon the fair creature over which two men have gone mad."

Ione recoiled a step.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Ada. "You look frightened. Can it be you are afraid of me?"

"No, I do not fear you."

"Then, why is your face so white? You are pale as the dead. All the color has left your cheeks and with it your beauty has fled. You depend very much on your color. Without the pink flush that seems to come and go at your command you would not be a girl to turn the head of any man. And you will lose it when you become older—you will fade."

She seemed to take delight in taunting the tortured girl. Her own beauty was marred by the hard and cruel lines which had formed around her mouth, and, like Ione, much of her natural color was absent.

"Why do you come to me with such talk?" asked Ione, half-reproachfully, half-angrily.

"I have told you why I came. I wanted to

look once again upon the face of her who has turned the brains of two strong men. They both love you—or imagine they do."

It was needless to ask whom she meant.

"It must be they imagine they love me," continued Ada. "It is an infatuation that will wear off. You cannot hold the love of any man! But for a time they are deluded, and they have gone out to kill each other for you. What folly!"

Beneath such biting scorn the color faintly tinged the cheeks of the listening girl for a moment; but it quickly faded as she thought of the two men who had loved her, one of whom might be lying dead at that moment, shot down by the other. She silently wrung her hands and pressed them over her face.

"Is it thus you try to shut out the haunting vision of the two who at this moment may be looking into each other's eyes over the barrels of loaded pistols? I should think your heart would be wrung with the bitterest torture when you think of that."

"Don't, don't, don't!"

"Aha! It does touch you! Still you are here while they have gone out to slay each other! You let them go! One will not return, and his blood will be on your hands! You will be as much his murderer as if your hand held the weapon that ended his life!"

"I would have prevented it if I could!"

Ada laughed, scornfully.

"It looks that way!"

"Yet it is true. If I knew where they were at this moment, I would go to them if I had to creep the distance on my hands and knees!"

"And still your folly sent them there. You led one of them to believe you loved him, then you turned to the other. You were false to a man whose love was a thousand times nobler than you deserved. I would have died for such a love as he gave you, yet you were false to him! You bartered his love for the affection of a man who had fallen in the scale of humanity, for what is Frank Fenton? A robber lieutenant at one time, but even then he showed his true nature and turned traitor to the men who trusted him. He is truly a fit mate for you!"

The color was creeping back into Ione's face again. The Outlaw Queen saw this, and hastened to drive it away with her next words:

"But, you have looked on Frank Fenton for the last time till you see him a corpse. Violet Vane is a dead shot, and he will put a bullet through Fenton's heart. Only one of the men will come back, and that one will not be the wretch for whom you sacrificed a noble man's love."

The listening girl uttered a low moan of horror and sunk into a chair, once more crushing her face into her hands. Ada smiled with almost fiendish cruelty as she saw how Ione was suffering.

"That is not all," continued the cruel creature, gliding close to the chair and bending over the girl. "Violet Vane has seen your perfidy, and henceforth he will scorn you. I shall be able to win his love, and the happiness will be mine that should have been yours. Is that not a pleasant thing for you to think of?"

No sound came from Ione's lips, but she shook with unuttered emotion.

Swiftly Ada unloosed the black cloak and held it in her hands, a desperate light in her eyes. She paused a moment to hiss in her intended victim's ear:

"I will take no chances. When Fenton is dead it may be your fickle love would turn back to the man you betrayed. He would scarcely have the folly to care for you then, but—I will take no chances."

She spread out the cloak and leaped forward, flinging it over Ione's head and shoulders. At the same instant she uttered a sharp signal whistle.

The door was flung open and two men darted into the room. They were Rush Cole and Pistol Pete.

"I have her!" exclaimed Ada. "Here! Are the horses ready?"

"All ready."

"Then carry her straight to our new retreat, and guard her as you would your life."

The maiden was lifted and borne from the cabin. As they reached the open air, she succeeded in tearing the cloak from her head.

"Help, help, help!" she shrieked.

The ruffians uttered oaths of dismay.

"Mount—mount lively and be away!" commanded Ada.

But to Ione's cries there came answering shouts and the clatter of hoofs; then, as horsemen appeared plunging through the shadows near at hand, there were several pistol-shots.

Rush Cole threw up his arms and fell to rise no more.

In terror the others leaped upon the waiting horses, but as the woman sprung upward, she was dragged back by Royal Norman's sinewy hands. Pistol Pete and Hank Irons escaped with a few bullets singing past their ears.

The rescuers who had arrived in the very nick of time were Royal Norman and the young man whom Damascus knew as Bayard Swift.

Lifting Ione in his strong arms, the mine superintendent carried her into the cabin. As the lamplight fell upon his face, the girl saw who it was. Thinking of Vane, she gasped:

"Where is he?"

His eyes alone replied, and she shrieked:

"He is dead, dead!"

Then she fainted in his arms.

CHAPTER XVII.

LAST OF THE SIX.

"FIRE, fire, fire!"

Barely had the citizens of Damascus learned the cause of the fusillade of pistol-shots at the east side of the town, when they were startled by the cry of fire.

"Fire! What is it?"

"At ther Duke's! Some o'ther gang's fired his shebang!"

There was a general rush for the scene of the new excitement; but when the greater part of the crowd arrived there they discovered the fire had been extinguished, and the incendiaries captured.

"Who are they?" was the general question.

"Iron Hank and Pistol Pete."

"But they're not of ther Royal Duke gang."

"No."

"Then what for did they start the blaze?"

"Pure cussedness, I reckon."

But, that was not the explanation. The two toughs had started the fire in order to draw the attention of the people to that quarter of the town, and give them a chance to rescue their captive leader, Queen Ada. When Royal Norman and the ex-robber lieutenant had so suddenly come upon them, they had thought themselves assailed by a much larger number, both of the young men having kept in the shadows. Had they known the truth, they would not have fled in such a hasty manner. They had been detected and captured in the act of firing Horatio Duke's house.

With the body of the crowd, Frisky Fritz and J. Milton Mole arrived at the mine-owner's house.

"Py cracious!" exclaimed the little Dutchman. "This is shust v'at I vanta. If I can keeb this crowt around here I vill mage to them some revelation v'at vill knock uf them ther breathing outt."

He hastened to speak to a few men with whom in some manner he had become familiar since arriving in Damascus. These men spoke to others, and soon a considerable number were gathering fuel and piling it as if for a big bonfire in the street before Horatio Duke's house.

There were many conjectures concerning what was to follow, the prevailing opinion being that the fire-bugs were to be tried on the spot by an impromptu court; but a rumor passed over the throng that Mr. Duke would address the strikers. Instead of diminishing, the gathering increased in numbers till nearly the entire population of Damascus had assembled.

When the fire was started, and the light of the blaze fell on the assembled throng of expectant people, the front door of Horatio Duke's house swung open, and J. Milton Mole appeared. The poet had removed his battered white hat, but there was a heavy bandage around his head, as if he had sustained an injury of some kind. Tossing back his long hair, he touched his breast with the tips of the fingers of his left hand and bowed very low. Then he began to speak in rhyme, as usual:

"To gents and ladies gathered here
I have few words to say;
Some things, now dark, will seem quite clear
Before you go away.

Deceit has filled your hearts with rage
Against a noble man
Who in your wrongs did not engage;—
Believe me, if you can.

But, wronged himself, he lay in chains,
The victim of a foe
Whose evil hands and scheming brains
Had laid a brother low.

Though born alike in form and face,
In natures far apart,
One brother took the other's place,
And evil was his heart.

But to this town a person came
Who saw through the deceit;
And he will now your notice claim
And show to you the cheat."

The poet stepped aside, and Dutch Fritz promptly appeared, bowing and smiling.

"Yaw, dot vas so," agreed Fritz. "I vas dot veller v'at saw drough der grooked peesness, you pets you! I vas nod so pig as I might pe, und somedimes I gatches onto somedings. This town vas peen voolled like der Olt Poy, und don'd you vorgit him! I vas going to show you v'at I vas drivin' ad. Shust you dake a look ad this customers."

Two men appeared with a third between them, the last being manacled. Cries of amazement came from the crowd.

"It is Mr. Duke!"

"Dot vas apoud der vay id loogs," smiled the Dutchman; "but, who vas this, berhabs you can dell?"

A general shout of astonishment came from the assembly, as still another man appeared.

Were there two Horatio Dukes?

"This vas der genuvine ardicle, und no mis-dakes," asserted Fritz. "Der veller v'at haf dose peautiful vristers on vas der schnide, und, he vas der cus-tomers v'at haf raised der turvey! about this striging peesness. He mages all der beoble pelief dot he vas Meester Dukes, und all der time Meester Dukes vas von bris'ner mit der cellar uf his own house. How vas dot vor high?"

The listening citizens could scarcely credit their eyes and ears, but the genuine Horatio Duke hastened to say:

"What this gentleman has said is quite true. This man who looks so much like me, and who has successfully represented me for a short time, is in truth my half-brother. He is a fugitive from justice, and last night he applied to me for protection and concealment; but the nature of his crime was so revolting that I refused to have anything to do with him, for all of the ties of blood between us. He left this house in a rage, but at a later hour he stole back and gained admission in some manner. He attacked me in my bed and overcame me, then carried me to a walled apartment in the cellar—an apartment I had constructed for a special purpose. There he made me a prisoner, while he returned to work out his vile plot against me.

"With a razor this unnatural brother removed the beard upon his face, concealing the fact by a crafty staining of his newly shaved features. Then he donned a suit of my clothes and became as you see him, my counterpart. He had little trouble in terrifying and bribing my Irish servant to keep quiet, for Mike's keen eyes detected the deception. This afternoon Meta, my adopted daughter, also discovered the astounding fraud and denounced him to his face. From that time till the rascal's discomfiture she was a prisoner like myself.

"This man, realizing that his daring game could not continue a great time, resolved to ruin me while it was in his power to do so. For this reason he enforced the cut-down and all he could to enrage you, my fellow-citizens, against me. Little he cared if you blew up the mine! Little he cared if you burned this house! If the building burned, I would perish in the flames, Meta would perish in the flames, and the bold fraud might never be detected.

"But an officer of the law was on his track. Late this afternoon a person whom you know as Miss Mable Annable Miggles forced her way into the impostor's presence. By a crafty trick she overcame him, binding and gagging him securely. Then she tackled my trustless Irishman and soon had him attended to in a similar manner. After this, she searched the house, found where Meta and myself were confined and released us.

"Friends and fellow-citizens: You who know me best know I am not the man to oppress the laborer. I believe in paying every man the full amount he earns. It has never for one moment been my intention to reduce the wages of my men. They are honest and faithful, and they earn the money they receive. Every one who wishes to do so can return to work to-morrow at the old scale.

"But, do not forget that you, as well as I, owe a debt of gratitude to Miss Miggles."

What a cheer went up from the throng! They shouted for the "Duke of Damascus" till it seemed they would split their throats.

When the noise somewhat abated, some one called for Miss Miggles. Grinning broadly in his jolly manner, Frisky Fritz observed:

"If dot veemales vas coming around this vay berhabs I had petter tage a sneak der corner around. She vas von holy derror v'en she gits

her muscles on, I pelief I pet you. I hat sooner pe kickt py dot mules than ha'f her shoood off ad me her shaw."

But, the little Dutchman made some singular and rapid movements with a startling result. His copious figure suddenly dissolved into a mass of crumpled skirts which fluttered down and concealed his male attire even as he buttoned a loose waist about the upper part of his form. An old sun-bonnet was snapped out of some place of concealment and whisked onto his head. Then, as he tied the strings under his chin and gave his face a twist that seemed to rob it of its roundness and make it long and solemn, he vociferated in Miss Miggles' sharp and rasping voice:

"Landy sakes to goodness! if here hain't a congregathering of horrid men, and if there is anything I do respise it is a man!"

A perfect roar of astonishment and delight burst from the throng as the full magnitude of the deception broke upon them.

Fritz and Miss Miggles were one and the same!

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the skillful impersonator, when silence in a measure had been restored, "I am in truth Cyrus Craft, of the Pinkerton Detective Agency."

Rapidly he removed the female rig and stood before them in male attire once more. Then he added:

"I was detailed to capture this man in manacles, Jim Derril, who is wanted for murder. He is a crafty villain, but I have 'nipped' him at last."

It ended with a lynching—Hank Irons and Pistol Pete being accorded the benefit of Judge Lynch's justice, while Queen Ada, the wicked, with a pistol, ended her own life when she discovered that the ex-robber lieutenant was the survivor of the duel with Violet Vane.

Thus, the hand of stern retribution had destroyed the Serpent Six.

Jim Derril received the punishment his crime merited.

Frank Fenton—known in Damascus as Bayard Swift—and Ione Wilson, the veiled lady, disappeared from that part of the country, and no man save Royal Norman knew whither they went.

The men returned to work, and once more things prospered in Damascus, where Horatio Duke continued to be the most popular of all its citizens.

In due course of time Royal and Meta were married.

The sun had sunk behind the mountains and night was swiftly coming on when a solitary horseman halted at a point where the rugged trail led downward into a valley.

It was J. Milton Mole.

There was an expression of heavy sadness upon the poet's face, and he still wore the bandage around his head. He spoke aloud:

"Well, that part of my life is left behind forever. God only knows what the future will bring. I will cast aside this disguise, never to assume it again. It has served me well in accomplishing my purpose, as also has my ventriloquial gift. Right here I will leave J. Milton Mole forever."

He threw aside the battered high white hat and removed a wig of false hair from his head. Then, producing a flask, he bathed his face with a liquid that quickly removed the lines so skillfully penciled there, and—

The man was Violet Vane!

"It takes more than a scalp wound to kill me," he grimly observed, as he once more arranged the bandage about his head. "Fenton's bullet came near ending my existence, but he shot a trifle too high. However, he thinks me dead, thanks to the detective, who himself was deceived for the time. Had Fenton and Norman remained a few moments longer they would have discovered the truth; but I am glad it is as it is, and I hope we may never meet again."

For several minutes he remained in a position of deepest thought, his lips rigidly compressed and the look of sadness still in his dark eyes. At length he spoke to the horse and rode down the trail, man and animal soon being lost in the murky shadows now lurking in the valley.

THE END.

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